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Isekai Rebuilding Project

Author: Yukika Minamino

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The Crumbling World

1.

Surely, there is no person alive who has no complaints about their life whatsoever. Even those living lives that seem picture perfect to others can have a soft voice in their heads whispering what could have been. It's not an unusual feeling to have. That being said...

"I wasn't sincerely hoping for something like this..."

I mumbled, as I stared into the empty space. There really was nothing there. It was too empty to even call it barren. If I had to make a comparison, it felt like the end of the universe. However, as I had never visited such a place before, I had no idea if that comparison was accurate. All I knew was that I wasn't in the south-side entrance of Sapporo Station, where I'd planned to meet up with my belle.

"You don't seem too troubled."

An androgynous voice. I couldn't see the speaker, though.

"...You may be surprised. I'm at my limits, here and there."

I shrugged my shoulders. In the empty space, I could barely tell up from down. If I did appear to be keeping my cool, it was solely because I'd accepted the plots of various Isekai, or transported-to-another-world, stories I'd read or watched as vicarious experiences.

"Am I dead?"

I had no recollection of being hit by a semi or anything like that.

"Eiji Kazama, you are not dead. I am almost curious enough to ask how you reached that conclusion."

The voice said my name. I felt no fear in learning that this entity had my personal information. That ship had sailed a long, long time ago.

“Allow me to explain.”

With that, the entity appeared before me: a woman, who appeared to be in her twenties.

“...A goddess, perhaps?”

“I see. That is how I appear to you?”

“Which means?”

“My appearance merely reflects your mentality. In short, I only appear this way because you think that anyone who comes out to explain things in this kind of situation must be a goddess or someone of the like.”

“Hmm... That’s how it works...”

I gave a vague nod. To be honest, I didn’t understand the entirety of what this woman just said, let alone accept it. That being said, if I kept interrupting our conversation would never move forward. Any disagreements or counterpoints could be made after hearing the other party out.

“There is something I want you to do.”

The woman stared at me intently. Her face was attractive, and her expression lively. If she was the embodiment of my imagination, that would make me a rather shallow man. I apologized silently to my fiancée for the fact that the woman looked nothing like her.

“I want you to save a dimension, or a world, from your point of view, separate from your own.”

“...It’s not that I didn’t expect it, but now that I’ve heard it out loud, it sounds incredibly vapid.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. A chosen hero saving the world, a very common story in the fantasy genre; however, it is only acceptable within the realms of fiction. An entire world saved by a single hero? How cheap can it get? I hadn’t spent my 31 years on Earth thus far under a rock. I had some sense of logic. There’s only so much a single human being could possibly accomplish. Even if that person were to perform to the best of their abilities, the results would be far from perfect.

“The predicament itself is vapid, so the explanation of it can be nothing but.”

The woman, too, cracked an ironic grin.

“Hm?”

“‘Save’ may not have been the correct word to use. What actually needs to be done is ‘repair.’”

“Repair?”

“Correct. Repair of a world on the brink of destruction, thanks to one of your kind.”

The woman explained as much, without changing her expression. Apparently, a few Japanese people traveled to this world where they spread various pieces of knowledge, bringing about various changes in the world.

“The overpowered protagonist type. I’ve never considered that to be morally questionable.”

“At its core, it isn’t. There are plenty of precedents, too.”

“Really?”

“Same as your world. It was shaped into what it is today through all manner of interference and ripple effects.”

It sounded similar to Official Development Assistance performed by first-world nations in developing nations. A world that possessed advanced technology or knowledge bestowing those things to worlds that were falling behind; the history of the universe must have been woven that way for all eternity. Come to think of it, technological revolutions on Earth had periods of rapid improvement and periods of stagnation throughout history. There is even a theory that claims that there were people in ancient Greece who were convinced that the Earth was round, way before methods of crossing an ocean had been invented.

I sighed. The topic of conversation was getting a little too grandiose. I needed a little more time to comprehend everything.

“So, in summary, I am to travel to a world where other Japanese people have been sent and counteract the things they have done. Is that correct?”

“In general, your understanding is not incorrect.”

“Why me?”

That must be a ubiquitous question. This time, the beautiful woman wore a distinctive smile.

“No real reason.”

“How irrational...”

“If I must give a reason, you are the polar opposite of the types who have been selected so far.”

“That’s...”

I knew exactly what she meant. Nowadays, many of the overabundant Isekai works star an unprivileged protagonist. Agoraphobic, bullied, neglected, abused... It’s my guess that no protagonist has lived a life as utterly ordinary as mine. Born in a normal household, I spent my youth with no noteworthy events to speak of. I’d attended an average-level high school, then a nameless private university. After graduating, I became a city clerk without really questioning my path, and served as a government worker ever since. Receiving one promotion in my twenties was neither especially early nor late, but expected.

I also had a fiancée. At 27, she was four years younger than me. We’d dated for three years, and had already introduced each other to our families. We planned to get married next year.

“Your employer will never go out of business, and you will never be fired, barring extreme circumstances. You have days off when you’re supposed to, and have enough time and money for leisurely activities. Everything is well with your fiancée, and you respect each other’s interests. Quite the Instagrammable life; I’m envious.”

I had no need to fantasize about another world. I was mostly content with my life.

“A boring life. No plot twists. No adventures.”

“Many would take offense to that comment.”

“I’m sure. I know there are people who struggle to survive day-to-day, and

people who can't find hope or aspirations for the future."

The woman chuckled, and I reciprocated. I wanted this life. No one can choose their place of birth or the sex they are born as, but people can choose which schools to attend and which occupation to pursue. I was living my dime-a-dozen life of my own volition.

"Which means you are the polar opposite of those who proceeded you. That's why you were chosen."

A forked road presented to the everyman.

"...Is it possible to refuse?"

"It is. But do you want to refuse?"

"..."

She saw right through me. It was true. Ever since I arrived in this space I was elated. My heart was clamoring. I could feel it: something was about to begin. Still, I couldn't walk away from the life I had. My parents, fiancée, friends... they were all chains dear to me. I couldn't let them go.

"When you die in the other world, I'll bring you back to this moment in time."

As I hesitated to answer, the woman proposed a condition.

"When I die?"

"From ailment, combat, old age. No matter the cause. The time limit is your lifetime. Just try the best you can during that time."

"Try... What about results?"

"I don't ask any of you. Trying one's best doesn't always work. What's important isn't the end result but whether or not we've explored all avenues. You understand, don't you?"

Ridiculous. And she thought I understood?

"In the bureaucratic sense, you mean?"

"Correct."

"Well, that's the worst."

In bureaucracy, results are not entirely important. Putting in the effort and yielding no results is commended more than achieving results without any effort. Working hard until closing time with nothing to show for it is preferred to achieving spectacular results with five minutes of work.

“It’s not too different in our business, either. There was a complaint from the god on-site that the humans pulled from your world were less than ideal. So, we settled on sending someone with characteristics that contrasted theirs.”

If I didn’t hit the mark, no problem. All that would happen is these entities would deem humans from my world unfit for the job. No more recruiting from my world. That’s it.

“I’m sensing an anyway-the-wind-blows kind of stance, here...”

“Mr. Eiji Kazama. I, personally, am not a fan of inter-world travel. Whether a world flourishes or collapses, I believe it should happen under the sole responsibility of the occupants of that world.”

“I see...”

“Now, let me ask you, Eiji Kazama. *Ja?* Or *Nein?*”

2.

God does nothing. No matter how prideful humans become, there will be no wrath nor judgment. No matter how much humans suffer, or stand at the brink of extinction, there will be no saving grace. God only watches on. Like an audience devoid of emotion and interest.

That’s not a bad way to think about things, though. Should a god, a super-human, or a Warrior of Light appear every time humanity is at stake, and guide them towards the righteous path? How dare they? How could anyone call that an authentic history of humanity? A side character who exists only to be saved by someone superior; is that the sole purpose of humans in this universe?

I defy that notion. Humans have saved themselves out of pickles in the past, and that will be the case in the future. If, one in a million, we find ourselves in a situation we can’t handle, we will ask for help. We will grind our foreheads to the ground and beg for mercy. Of course, whether they will accept our plea or

not is another matter entirely.

“Now that you’ve explained it’s like an ODA...”

I scratched my head. Before me wasn’t Sapporo Station. Instead there was an endless field of green grass and a single path. It didn’t look like Japan, but it’s not like I was familiar with every location within my home country. I couldn’t say without a doubt that I was no longer in Japan.

“I mean, I’m sure this is the world in question.”

While I couldn’t confirm it with absolute certainty, I had no reason to doubt it. That beautiful woman (who never called herself a goddess, after all) had no reason to send me anywhere but. I had accepted her request.

It would have been easy to refuse, saying ‘ain’t my problem.’ Even though Japanese people caused the mess, it was not something I was personally responsible for. What’s more, the entities from this world were the ones who summoned them in the first place. It didn’t make any sense to deem my world responsible for the damage. They should have accounted for it. They should have foreseen what kind of actions someone who had lived an oppressed life would take when suddenly given immense power and the ability to affect the destiny of others, as well as what kind of effects those actions would have. Once used in any other way than those specified in the manual, any appliance would be out of warranty. In that analogy, someone being sent to repair the product isn’t protocol. This is basically customer service.

“It all seems pretty stupid.”

“You didn’t take too long to make your decision for someone who feels that way.”

“True. It wasn’t like I was coming up with some grand justification, though. It just sounded like fun. I couldn’t help it.”

A stable job, a wonderful fiancée, a family dear to me... I had no dissatisfaction with any of them. But somewhere deep inside, I felt some adoration for a life different than my own.

“So, I have the same motive as my predecessors. Just in a direction. I guess that means I felt confined, too.”

“Not an easy way of life, is it?”

“You said it. Speaking of...”

I looked over to see the creature I was having a friendly conversation with. It had a body covered in scales of a color somewhere in between blue and green, a long neck, and a horned head. There was a pair of something that resembled wings on its back, and its tail was slapping the ground with some force. One of the staples of fantasy: a dragon. Except this one wasn't that big; it was as tall as me, at most.

“What are you, anyway?”

“That's a long story. In short, I am your partner, Eiji.”

“Isn't that a little too short!?”

My partner was a tiny dragon. There was definitely more explaining to do.

“Tsk.”

“I heard that!”

“That was a dragon's tonguing. It serves as a starter when breathing fire.”

“Hey! Was that little blurb necessary!? Was it!?”

“For style points. Anyway, I am basically an interface. I know your kind finds it easier to gain and organize information if you're speaking with someone, face to face.”

The dragon burst out into laughter. Its meticulously aligned fangs scared me a little. In other words, this dragon was here to guide and assist me as I traveled through an unfamiliar world. Why was it a dragon and not a human? For style points, probably.

Well, it's true that having the beautiful woman I met earlier as my travel companion would not work out in my favor. Traveling with a beautiful woman alone while I have a girlfriend, nay, fiancée? That would spell all sorts of trouble for me. While I have never once considered myself to be an aggressive type, I have as much libido as anyone else. Having a travel companion for whom I could in no conceivable fashion grow feelings toward is a better option to prevent unwanted circumstances, I'm sure.

“I get the gist. What should I call you?”

“I have no name. Call me by any name. Ayano, for example.”

“I don’t want you to share a name with my fiancée...”

“Then something like Zeke is fine.”

“I don’t get the reference... My name isn’t Van...”

“Hm. You get the gist. Were you even born?”

“Actually, yeah. I was pretty much the target audience.”

I was born in 1986, which puts me in middle school around the time. Which doesn’t really matter.

“Which sex are you, by the way?”

“Female.”

“Tiamat, then. Tia for short.”

Tiamat is the name of the dragon god who appears in Mesopotamian mythology. A dragon goddess, actually, so I wasn’t too far off the mark.

“A little thoughtless, don’t you think? What were you going to do if I was a male dragon?”

“Bahamut, I guess.”

“Your knowledge seems to stem from video games rather than mythology, Eiji. Bahamut was only depicted as a dragon for the first time in Dungeons and Dragons.”

“You know a lot of things, don’t you, Tia?”

“I have been implemented with most knowledge presumed to be useful, and most knowledge presumed to be not.”

“Why bother with the latter...?”

“For witty conversation. It would be lonely to traverse a strange world alone.”

“Thank you for your thoughtful concern.”

I chuckled. I didn’t consider myself particularly lacking in social skills, but

could I jump right into a crowd of people and engage in conversation in a world where I had no knowledge of their culture or customs? I had to say no. I didn't even know if we could understand each other. I decided to ask Tiamat about it.

"You can speak with them, no problem. You have also been implemented with the bare essentials of communication tools."

How reassuring. It seemed that I had been tweaked with on my inter-world journey. There was even a chance I'd been given some broken power.

"Nope. No special abilities for you, Eiji."

"Dammit! You didn't even let me ask!"

"Were you even listening to me? Bare. Essentials."

"...Thanks for the flawless double tap. Can't I dream a little dream?"

"You are human, after all. Tia-o."

"A little too much wit, don't you think?"

It looked like I wasn't given any special powers out of respect for the god of this land. I guess they would be a little on edge after a bunch of Japanese people with broken powers messed up their world. That makes this god rather human-like, I thought.

"The gods from Earth's mythology are pretty human-like, too."

I couldn't argue with that. In most cases, gods were created by men. Which wasn't entirely accurate. They were essentially the product of human imagination and faith. That's why none of them take shapes beyond human imagination, and their characteristics are similar to humans.

"In that sense, the goddess I met was cut-and-dried."

"That wasn't a goddess."

"Oh, really?"

"Something a little more realistic. An Inspector for the Interstellar League of Nations."

"What part about that is realistic? Huh? Huh?"

“I don’t mind answering, but it will take some time to explain the intricacies.”

“How long?”

“If I were to only use words you can understand, about four years.”

“All right, Tia. Basically a goddess, then.”

“Wise choice of comprehension. Now, it seems we’ve reached our destination while we entertained ourselves with idle chatter.”

Close to the horizon I could see a pretty intimidating gate to a city. The wall that seemed to enclose the entire city was just as intimidating.

“That’s Lishua, the royal capital of the Azur Kingdom.”

“Big city. I wonder if they have some good cuisine.”

I don’t think I’m the only one who first looks forward to food when traveling. When I visit a place for the first time, I want to start off by getting some good food.

“May not be a delicacy for you, Eiji. You can eat rice here,” the dragon said, with half a chuckle.

“They have rice.”

“They do. Silver rice, at that.”

“Silver rice...”

I nearly laughed at Tiamat’s old-fashioned vernacular, when my face stiffened halfway through. In other words, purely white rice. Anyone from modern-day Earth may wonder what the problem is, precisely because they live in the modern day. Even in Japan, commoners mostly ate brown rice until the 1930s. And bam. There’s white rice available in a medieval fantasy world.

“Eiji. Let me repeat. This is a world turned Waya by the Japanese.”

3.

Waya. A regional word from Hokkaido, my home province, that means a state of utter chaos. It was pretty surreal to hear a dragon speak the Hokkaido

dialect, but not as surreal as the things taking place in this country. White rice in a medieval fantasy world? Where to start...?

“You want me to change things back to how they were...?”

“You can’t,” Tiamat replied with a swift declaration. With a look, I pried her for an explanation.

“Once lives have been enhanced, no one will accept the inconveniences of their former lives. You’re familiar with that, Eiji.”

“...You got me there.”

It’s true. I had lived my whole life with modern technology. I couldn’t go back to live in the caves. I want to drink cold beer; I want to take clean baths; I want to live in a comfortable house. I want to easily gain information through my electronic devices, and I want to be able to get food or snacks whenever I want. The same sentiment must hold true for society as a whole. This becomes apparent during power outages, for example. They illuminate how much modern civilization depends on electricity, and how modern-day humans can’t live without it.

After the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, electricity in Japan was scarce. It was only natural, since the production of nuclear power, which was a major contributor, had been practically halted. More natural ways of producing electricity had been spotlighted in the media, but those weren’t enough to make up for the loss of nuclear. Despite our predicament, how many Japanese people spent their lives consciously preserving energy? I surely was not one of them. Just as Tiamat pointed out, I couldn’t stand to lower my quality of life.

As my occupation called for it, I’d listened to some concerned citizens from time to time. One such time happened when I was still being called a rookie. I believe they had come in to ask questions about their taxes. Saying their business wasn’t doing well, so they couldn’t pay their taxes, or something like that. After the bubble popped, the Japanese economy had been in a steady decline with no indication of that changing.

After listening for a while, assuming that this must be a common concern, they said something that stunned me. Apparently, no matter how much they tried, this couple could not live off of anything less than about 400,000 yen a

month. The thought crossed my mind to give them a head-butt over the counter. At the time, my first salary out of college was about 160,000 yen a month. After insurance, taxes, etc., I was left 140,000 yen or so each month. How could they need nearly three times the amount of my salary to survive a month? They ate as much as they wanted, played as much as they wanted, and claimed that they were being frugal. To top it all off: “Must be nice to work for the government. You live off of our taxes,” they said. Dammit. Just remembering it makes my blood boil.

“Come back down, Eiji. Where are you floating off to?”

“My bad. I just remembered something infuriating.”

“I thought it was supposed to be something funny. A new use for colloquialism, I see,” Tiamat said, kind of distant from me, as I was unleashing my anger against the innocent ground of the Azur Kingdom.

“So it’s difficult to downgrade your life. I get the point.”

“Mm-hm.”

At the end of the day, you can’t sleep in your baby crib once you’ve grown out of it. It seemed impossible to force the people of this world, who had tasted modern-day technology, back to their old ways.

“Unless we blow it all up, or something.”

“Same goes for Earth. If all technology were to return to dust, people would be forced to be cavemen again.”

“It would be easier here than on Earth. The knowledge of technology is still hoarded by the select few.”

“That’s a weird comparison. It’s not something I can accomplish, anyway.”

It would be difficult to rob the world of knowledge that had already been made public. If information was being kept close to the chest of a select few, killing those few would be an option. Except that was impossible. A feeble bureaucrat like myself had no combat skills to do so. Even if I did, I didn’t want to kill anyone.

“Hm. I know. That’s why I don’t know what your next step is yet, Eiji.”

“Thought so...”

Things weren't so easy. The god on-site apparently wanted it fixed. How could I fix it? I didn't even know what state the world had to be in to be deemed fixed.

“First, we need to find out what problems are occurring here,” Tiamat said, with a big yawn.

It's only natural, but there was a security check when entering the city.

“Young man. From where have you hailed?” a soldier asked, holding a spear. He must have been one of the guards. I would call him a burly man with a shapely mustache, but he was shorter than me. Just about 175cm, I figured. I didn't know the details, though, as I didn't have any special abilities that allowed me to accurately assess one's height, weight, or bust size. In any case... ‘young man?’ After the age of thirty, it's not often that one is called young. In fact, I was on the cusp of ‘middle age.’ Perhaps in nine years...

“We are travelers. We came from...”

“The Dragon Realm. I am Tiamat. This is Eiji.”

“Ah. A Hermit in the flesh. Forgive me.”

“Mm.”

Tiamat returned a light bow. I interpreted the quick look she gave me to mean ‘leave it to me.’

“Ordinarily, we remain detached from the lower realm, but the Azur's flourishment has piqued our interest. I humbly request permission to enter,” she declared with eloquence, boasting an impressive attitude. Her dragon body added to the intimidation factor, too.

“In that case, you are most welcome here. Please fill out these columns here, Master Hermit.”

The soldier, pleased by the compliment of his nation, showed us to what looked like voting booths. He gave us each a piece of paper and a pen.

Hold on a minute. What time period on Earth did this world equate to? While the paper was primitive, this kind of paper didn't become common in Japan

until the Meiji period, or after 1868. As for the pen, this type that contains its own ink wasn't invented until the 1800s. It just seemed like... things were thrown together sloppily just to eliminate some inconveniences in life.

That was my thought process as I faced the piece of paper. I was tasked with filling them out, as Tiamat's hands *paws* talons weren't suited for a pen. I filled them out one by one; it seemed I had no issue reading and writing the language of this world.

"Oh. How old are you, Tia?"

"No idea. I never had a custom to keep track of my age, either."

"Really... Oops..."

It's possible that Tiamat was created at the moment of my inter-world travel, but I couldn't put down 'age: 0.' Could I turn these in partially blank?

"No problem, sir. These are formalities."

I gave the soldier a pleading look, and he returned a big nod of approval. Although I couldn't help but think that they should probably maintain a front, especially if these were formalities, I was not about to go poke a wasp's nest.

With a fake smile, I handed over the papers with good portions of them left blank.

"Oh, you are 31, Master Eiji! I would have guessed that Hermits age differently than us!"

He was surprised, for some reason. Is there a problem with the fact that I'm thirty, huh? Is there?

"I can't believe you are a whole ten years older than I am!"

Oh, okay... "Wait, ten!?"

I couldn't help but yelp. This soldier was 21? There's no way he's anywhere below his mid-forties. That was when a certain possibility crossed my mind.

4.

During the Edo period, the Japanese people appeared much older when

compared to people of the same age today. It's not like there's accurate data, or photographs, so there is no way to verify this. The life expectancy data doesn't help either, since the high infant mortality rate lowers the mean. The infant mortality in 1899, when we do have data from, was more than 15%. In other words, only about eight out of ten people lived past the age of five. That was in the 32nd year of the Meiji period. These numbers would not have been better back in the Edo period.

In 1891 (24th year of Meiji), life expectancy was about 44 years. It's worth noting that the life expectancy of a particular year is not the mean of the age of people who died that year, but the average lifespan of the people born that year. Which meant that, if they were born in 1891 in Japan, men would live 42.8 years and women would live 44.3 years on average.

So did no one live past the age of fifty? Of course, some people did. There were always people who lived longer lives than expected. However, it's also true that they didn't live as long as modern-day people in Japan. At age fifty, one was considered to be of old age. In the example of Natsume Soseki, who has relatively well-preserved photographs... How old does he look in his famous portrait? The one used on an iteration of the 1000 yen bill. By the way, he passed away at the age of 49.

Back to the Edo period. First of all, the health of the average person was inferior to today. Foods that build strong muscle and bone were hard to come by. Everyone worked hard labor without any skin care products or makeup. Who knows how true this is, but there is even a theory out there that people in the Edo period looked two decades older, when compared to someone of the same age in modern day. Considering this, maybe it's not too outlandish that I thought this 21-year-old soldier was in his mid-forties.

"How wonderful, Master Hermit. You must live much longer than us, I'm sure."

"...We'll see about that."

I decided to give a vague response. If the life expectancy of these people was forty years, mine was double that. I didn't think that's something I wanted to bring to light during small talk.

“Then, please enjoy your stay in Lishua.”

The soldier accepted our papers, and held up his lance for us. What a nice young man.

“It seems you’ve been wandering deep into your thoughts since earlier,” Tiamat said, as we were walking down the main street.

“Yeah, like that soldier’s age...”

“About how he looked older than you?”

“Something like that...”

Of course I had a few thoughts about it. I was a resident of the modern-day real world, and he’s in a fantasy world. I guess the only difference between us was how progressed each of our societies were. Still, I couldn’t brush off the fact that the person I had just spoken to expected to die twice as early as I did.

“Hm. Since he looks that old at twenty or so, you don’t think the women will be lookers, either.”

“Wait. Wait wait wait wait! That’s not right! How did you reach that conclusion!?”

“Hm?”

The dragon crooked its neck. It was not cute.

“I have a fiancée!”

“You know. A side chick. Or Resort Lovers.”

“Nasty! And I don’t get the second one!”

“A hit single from 1989.”

“How the hell...!?”

At the time, I was three years old.

“A song that epitomizes the height of the economic bubble. The phrase ‘Resort Lovers’ became less and less used in Japan after the bubble burst. Now it’s obsolete...”

“Who asked you for the trivia...?”

This dragon really does know a lot of crap. I guess this is an example of the useless knowledge implemented in her. So utterly useless.

“Don’t sweat it. We’re not of this world, anyway. No good will come from being sentimental here.”

This little... Did she only make the absurd proposal to get my mind off of the aging thing? I wasn’t expecting that.

“...I owe you one, Tia.”

“Make sure to include some interest when repaying it.”

“All righty.”

Just as in numerous fantasy stories, the city of Lishua hosted an Adventurers’ Guild.

“Naturally. Titles aside, the formation of unions by those in the same industry are historically inevitable.”

Tiamat had a good point. Whether you’re an adventurer, or handyman, or Mr. Fix It, or whatever, trying to earn contracts on your own was no easy task. Especially when advertising (in our modern sense of the word) was nonexistent. People could barely advertise their occupation to those in town. Those with their own shop or office space could bring in customers by putting up a sign, but I’m sure that’s unattainable for most. On the other hand, that’s why a sign for a business guaranteed a certain level of trustworthiness.

“They couldn’t get contracts on their own, so they formed a guild to make that process easier. Yep, seems like a natural course.”

“If the guild had formed naturally, you’d be right on the mark,” Tiamat said with sarcasm, as she slapped her tail against the ground.

Our first destination: the Adventurers’ Guild. Of course, we weren’t here to register as guild members, nor to look for any contracts.

“Guess you’re right.”

I shrugged. There was no way that an occupation like an adventurer would hold a vital part in society. Exploring dungeons, defeating monsters, gathering herbs, guarding travelers... It's only in the world of fiction where people can make a living doing these kinds of things. The first is out of the question, and if someone with a certain level of strength is required to handle any of the other tasks, it's already serious enough that a government agency, local or national, should be doing something about it. Each of them represents the presence of a threat close to civilization. Not something you'd want to trust a band of lawless fighters with.

"I suppose it all starts with what an adventurer really is," said Tia. Were they mercenaries? Speculators? Private eyes? Jacks-of-all-trade?

"In any case, there's not much demand for them."

With a chuckle, I opened the door to the guild. There were a few sets of tables and chairs in the large hall, and there was a bulletin board on the wall, surely for posting quests on. At the far end of the hall was a reception counter. A few groups were hanging out in the hall who must have been parties of adventurers. They were giving us less than friendly glances. I couldn't deny that we were eye-catching: a man much taller than this world's average walking in with a human-sized dragon. At this rate of clichés, I expected a thug or two to come up to us ready to start a fight. Sadly, all they did was watch. I had no desire to be the object of voyeurism, so it was just awkward. We approached the reception counter.

"Excuse me..."

"Are you here to file a quest? Or to register as a member?"

A female employee greeted us with a gentle tone and friendly smile. A model receptionist. She appeared to be in her early forties... so she must have been in her early twenties.

"Well, neither, actually. We just have a few questions."

"What might they be?"

She crooked her neck. A cute gesture unbecoming of a woman in her forties, but I then remembered that she must be in her twenties. The reality in front of

me wasn't clicking with my preconceptions.

"We want to know how this guild came to be."

"I see..."

She wore a puzzled expression, and I couldn't blame her. There must not be too many people that come in and ask such a thing. Not that I would expect the receptionist to be able to tell us the whole story, anyway. Not so much from any lack of authority, but rather from the lack of knowledge. I would love to have her show us to someone higher up who'd know. Now, how to put it...

"Lass. We are traveling Hermits. We are quite interested in how things are in the lower realm. That includes this guild. Won't you call the Guild Master for us?"

Tiamat came to the rescue, having seen that I was struggling.

Wow. Way to wave the Hermit title in her face. Surely it wouldn't hurt to be a little more reserved... I thought, as I am Japanese, and we Japanese believe humility is a virtue.

5.

"Hermits!? Pardon me, sires. Please wait here a moment."

The receptionist retreated to the back, apologetically. The magic word did wonders. Not only that, but some whispering started in the hall, too.

"At times like these, don't be coy when you don't need to, Eiji."

We entered the gates of Lishua under the title of Hermits. Now that we've used the title once already, it didn't make a difference how many more times we used it. In fact, it's a selling point for our character; we might as well use it every chance we get. That's a guide to job interviews too, by the way. Whether or not it was necessary here and now, it's hard to say. Remaining silent, I shrugged. Even when made aware of it, it takes a long time to get out of an entrenched behavior.

"You're the type who puts on a monster mask to do your dirty work."

“Got to give those meddling kids a chance.”

“This time, they’ve already had their chance.”

As we concluded our trivial conversation based on trivia, the receptionist returned with a man who seemed to be the character in charge. He was a portly man who appeared middle-aged, but it was tough for me to read the ages of the people here. I imagined I’d get used to it after a few years of living here.

“It’s an honor, Hermits. My name is Garish. I’m in charge of the Lishua branch of the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“Thank you, sir. My name is Eiji, and this is Tiamat. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

I mirrored the man’s bow. A polite first impression is something any Japanese worker learns to strive for, until the point it becomes second nature. I’d seen so many protagonists in fantasy pieces acting brazen toward people they’d never met before. Act that way in real life and most of their negotiations would end negatively for them. An adult thinks one thing, and says another. This isn’t even a noble concept, either.

“I was told you’re interested in the formation of our guild.”

“Mm. Unless I’m mistaken, this organization didn’t exist a century ago.”

Tiamat was the one who answered. Whether or not she really had knowledge of this world from a hundred years ago, I didn’t know.

“That is correct. The Adventurers’ Guild itself was only created about fifty years ago.”

“Hmm. A fresh business, then.”

Apparently a long-standing organization of fifty years was ‘fresh’ to Tiamat. Mister Garish didn’t seem offended, though. In fact, he seemed proud. An up-and-coming business managed to beat the competition. Perhaps he was boasting. At any time in history, traditions and name value are obstacles to someone.

“How rude of me not to offer you a seat, Hermits. This way, please.”

He lead us further in. We were the rude ones, showing up without an

appointment. Such a polite welcome made me feel a little guilty.

“Is this a good time? If it isn’t, we would...”

Don’t ask me to finish the sentence. Take the trail-off to be a Japanese accent.

“Oh, it’s most always a good time for me. My wife has been handling much of the business, lately.”

Mister Garish gave a quick look to the receptionist. She’s the wife, surprisingly. A family-run business.

“It’s so hard to move around these days. I’m taking plenty of rest, though.”

Woah, woah, woah. So he’s sick somehow. More the reason he shouldn’t be speaking to us now.

“In that case, you should rest, sir...”

“I just feel heavy, that’s all. I’ve seen a doctor just to be safe, and I was told that it wasn’t any illness.”

I had no idea what the standards for medical practices in this world were. At this point, I couldn’t decide whether to take the doctor’s word at face value. Still, upon reevaluating, Mister Garish didn’t look too well. While his stature was large, he was more swollen than portly. As I’m not an expert, I couldn’t discern more than that; but something was nagging at the corner of my mind. Lethargy and swollenness. ...It couldn’t be. That would be ridiculous. But the clues click. What did Tiamat say before we entered Lishua? That we could eat white rice here. White rice, lethargy, and swollenness. Was it what I thought it was? If I was right, the Japanese party who came here before me made a devastating blunder. If I recalled correctly, tens of thousands died from it each year. I became aware that my expression was turning more and more worrisome.

“What’s going on, Eiji?” Tiamat asked, probably concerned.

“...Mister Garish may be ill,” I said, with a face that must have made me look like the sickest man in the room.

We were then shown to what looked like the Guild Master’s office that also seemed to serve as a meeting room, as it contained a couch and coffee table in addition to a desk. I was entirely uninterested in the interior or furniture of the

room, however, as I desperately searched for a particular item.

“Is something the matter, Sir Eiji?”

“Um... Do you have a hammer? A small one will do.”

“Hammer? What would you do with such a thing?”

A confused expression crossed his face. It was only natural. Who in their right mind would request that of their host? But it was absolutely necessary. Apparently one can do the test with no tools whatsoever, but I didn't possess such a skill.

“Would this do?”

Still with the confused expression, Mister Garish produced a hammer from his tool box on the shelf.

“Then, sit on that desk please. Relax from the waist down so your feet dangle.”

“Uh-huh...”

Incredulity was written all over his face. If he didn't consider me a Hermit, he definitely would have kicked me out. I must have looked insane.

“Like this?”

The Guild Master shoved some papers on the desk away and sat down. I reached out and made sure that his legs were dangling.

“Mister Garish, I will lightly tap below your knee with this hammer. I just need you to stay relaxed.”

“All right...”

I assumed he didn't know what I was about to do. Tiamat must not have known either, as she was watching with enthusiasm.

I exhaled. Hit below the knee, where it's a little dented. Just a tad of an upper swing. Like hitting a tennis ball. Pop.

“...”

It didn't move. Did I do it wrong? One more time. No movement. It didn't

move for me.

“Gr...”

“Um... What are you doing, Sir Eiji?”

A young man with sweat on his brow and a terrified expression repeatedly tapping a man’s leg with a hammer. What a bizarre tableau.

“It’s called a tendon reflex. When I tap this part, your leg is supposed to jolt up.”

“Well, but, what does that mean?”

Mister Garish looked utterly confused. Of course he was. There was no way for him to know what the condition is called, what causes it, or how to treat it.

A demon brought over by a Japanese person into a medieval fantasy world. Also known as the Edo affliction in Japan, it became an epidemic in the 1870s, feared as one of the two most deadly diseases in Japan alongside tuberculosis. Each year tens of thousands died from it. It wasn’t until the early 1980s when the annual death count in Japan dropped under a thousand.

“Mister Garish, you are ill. You are afflicted with a disease that will cause your death if untreated.”

As calmly as I could, I declared my findings. It was scary for a non-medical-professional like me to make a diagnosis. But I believed that this was something I had to do. Clean up after the mess one of my kind left behind.

“What!? But the doctor said...”

“Of course they wouldn’t know. None of the best doctors would, either.”

It was a disease that wasn’t supposed to exist in this time period, well, this world at all.

“Mister Garish. The disease you have is called beriberi.”

6.

Beriberi. A bizarre disease that was epidemic in Japan from the 1870s to 1920s. For a long time, its cause was unknown. First of all, it rarely affected

elders and children, who had weaker immune systems. In fact, young and strong soldiers were often afflicted. The wealthier people, who ate better food, were afflicted more often. This happened at a time when the existence of vitamins was unknown. To boot, there were almost no examples of beriberi in western medicine, which had rapidly increased medical technology in Japan. A truly mysterious disease. Symptoms include lethargy, swollen limbs, and dulled senses. In the end, the disease is complicated by Wernicke's encephalopathy or heart conditions, resulting in death.

"Well, Mister Garish? Have you experienced any of those symptoms?"

"...I have," Mister Garish answered, after a moment of silence.

That wasn't good. In modern times, beriberi isn't a disease to be afraid of. Which may not sound right, but I only mean that it is curable. Since beriberi is caused by vitamin B1 deficiency, the treatment is to increase it. It's not complicated. The problem wasn't the complexity of the treatment, though. The problem was this situation where beriberi was already widespread. What to do...? What should I do?

"...Sir Eiji. Am I going to die...?" Mister Garish asked me, pale as a ghost. He must have dedicated his life thus far to his work to earn the title of Guild Master at such a young age. Married a few years ago, his life was smooth sailing. Now, he was about to die from a disease he had never heard of. That wasn't right. I could hear the frustration in his voice. Who could blame him? Most diseases are senseless. If two people share the exact same lifestyle, one could develop diabetes while the other doesn't. Some people get cancer, and others don't. That's how it is. In the case of beriberi, though, it can be cured and prevented. It wasn't like I was facing up against an infectious disease that required antibiotics to treat.

"It's all right, Mister Garish. We can cure it." I gave a reassuring smile.

"Are you sure? Eiji, giving false hope can be crueler than telling the truth," Tiamat interrupted. She knew I was not a doctor and just a clerk, after all.

"Beriberi can be cured with a change in diet."

"Oh?"

“For example... Mister Garish. You enjoy your white rice, don’t you?” I questioned, searching for confirmation more than an answer. He returned a nod, looking curious as to how I knew.

“And your liquor?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not the type to shy away from exercise.”

“How do you know all this, Sir Eiji?”

“Let’s see. I’ll say it’s because I’m a Hermit. First thing, I want you to change your diet until I formulate a cure.”

“Yes, sir...”

“No drinking. Eat as little rice as you can, and don’t exercise for a while.”

His lack of vitamin B1 had caused beriberi; I couldn’t let him lose any more of it. Since vitamin B1 is required to process carbohydrates, he should cut down on his carbohydrate intake. Exercise wasn’t a good idea, either. Beriberi was common among athletes and soldiers because exercise boosts metabolism, and therefore burns more glucose, spending more vitamin B1. Cutting back on those things should help with the symptoms somewhat. Then, he just needed to eat more foods rich in vitamin B1. Specifically, protein like red meat and fish. There’s a good amount of it in soybeans too, but just by changing from white rice to brown rice, he should see drastic changes.

I mean, none of that was necessary if you had a bottle of B1 supplements. I couldn’t expect something like that in this world, though, and I couldn’t go making this world dependent on modern medicine and supplements, either. Not if I wanted to avoid making the same mistakes as my predecessors who molded this world to be easier, more convenient, and better suited to their own needs.

“...I understand.”

“I hope to bring you some good news soon. Although, it might be better for us to have a title we can use when traveling to gather ingredients, for example. Can we register as adventurers, too?”

“Eiji. You’re going to be an adventurer?”

“You too, Tia.”

“Me!?”

“...You want to be adventurers, Hermits...?”

“Yes. We can’t go hunting or shopping or anything if we cause a commotion everywhere we go by letting people know we are Hermits.”

I shrugged. In short, I couldn’t deal with people reacting like Mister Garish or his wife had everywhere we went. Things would be easier if we were common adventurers.

“In that case...”

With a chuckle, Garish wrote us a letter. We had the recommendation of the Guild Master, it seemed. I was sure it would help with registering as adventurers.

“Thank you. Then let’s hop to it.”

Patting Tiamat on her shoulder, I exited the room. Thudding footsteps followed a few paces behind me.

Back in the hall, we went through the registration process at the reception. The receptionist (aka Mister Garish’s wife) provided us with some details. Apparently, there were ranks in the adventurer world. A newly registered rookie started as an F-rank (the bottom) and climbed up the ladder by gaining experience and producing results. The top rank is S-rank. A common system found in many of the Isekai fantasies out there. In other words, it worked like a video game.

“Come to think of it, it’s like classifying freelancers and part-timers.”

There are many people in this day and age who can’t or won’t work a full-time job, and make a living by temp work or part-time work. This is a system that ranks those kinds of people, limiting the type of contracts they can accept and the pay they can take.

If you want to work for our company, you at least have to be a B-rank.

We don't have any work for an F-rank. Try somewhere else.

These conversations may be had if the system existed in modern-day Japan.

“That’s gross,” Tiamat said, as if she had a bad taste in her mouth. It sure didn’t sound like a society where the freedom of job selection was guaranteed by law.

“Well, I guess it is efficient in a way. No need to waste your time going to job interviews at companies you have no chance of getting into.”

“Less waste but also less progression. Do you think the potential of a human can be quantified?”

“You hit the nail on the head, Tia. This system is blasphemous to humanity.”

I knew I had a sour face on as I looked at my newly acquired Adventurer Card. On it were my abilities, quantified.

Strength — E

Magic — F

Intelligence — C

Luck — D

I was so grateful I could cry. That was all figured out by placing my right hand above a literal crystal ball, by the way. How incredible. Just like that, apparently they could figure out that I had no physical strength, no magical powers, not even good luck, and barely average intelligence. In other words, the card read that I was worthless. What a joke.

“Just like a fortune teller machine, it’s not based on any facts. No sense letting it affect you.”

“Uh-huh...”

Well put, O’ Majestic Dragon. All of your stats are S. Very convincing. I just gave a half-hearted agreement. My stats didn’t matter, anyway. It’s not like I wanted to make a living as an adventurer or anything. First, I should look for any quests that mention symptoms similar to Garish’s. While I was limited to this area, I should be able to get a grasp of how widespread beriberi is.

“Um. Sir Eiji...?”

The receptionist called me back as I walked away.

“What is it?”

“I need the registration fee...”

“Oof.”

They charged a fee. It’s an unfriendly world we live in.

“Tia.”

“Why would you think I have any money, Eiji?”

“...Saw that coming.”

I was wearing the same clothes as when I was heading to meet my fiancée. Tiamat was naked. She’s a dragon, after all. Naturally, neither of us had any of this world’s money.

7.

“Ugh... I want to go home...”

“You’re a grown man. Stop sulking already. It’s annoying,” said Tiamat.

Of course. You’re not affected. You got off scot-free!

As we were penniless, I had to sell something I was wearing. That was the only way. We couldn’t have borrowed money from anyone when they had no reason to trust us. Our saving grace, as it turned out, was a merchant that happened to be in the hall. He offered to buy the watch on my left wrist. I checked with Tiamat, and they counted each day in twenty-four hours, just like on Earth. As I didn’t want to adjust to a new system of keeping time, I was willing to accept this rather convenient fact. It was probably a concept imported by the Japanese before me, anyway.

In any case, we couldn’t do anything without some money. Not even pay the registration fee to become adventurers. When push comes to shove... The thing was, that wrist watch was very dear to me. It was very dear to me. That’s right, I said it twice. An IWC Portugieser Chronograph. I’d wanted it so bad I saved up

for three years. It wasn't expensive for an IWC watch, but my model cost me about 650,000 yen. The price didn't matter, though. I was in love. Love at first sight. I was born only to wear you on my wrist.

"How lucky that you had something valuable on you."

"Yeah! You're right, you know!? I know you're completely right, but...!"

The Portugieser was first crafted by the Swiss watchmaker for a seafaring Portuguese merchant. It's full of that sense of wonder!

"You can't eat a sense of wonder, after all," said Tia.

After much conflict and self-questioning, I finally parted with my beloved watch. I had sworn not to wear any other watch as long as I lived... The merchant paid one hundred gold coins for it. Apparently that was a ridiculous amount of money. Tiamat explained that I should consider a gold coin to be the equivalent of about 10,000 yen. On paper, I turned a big profit. Again, that didn't matter. The only thing was, even a merchant like him doesn't carry that much cash around. I was given ten gold coins to start, and I was to visit his shop with the certificate later. This promise was made while the receptionist and the other members of the guild watched, so I doubted he'd breach it. Adieu, my dear Chronograph.

Many of the quests posted on the bulletin board were, in fact, for gathering herbs. Most of those quests were made by treatment wards and mage doctors.

"More than I expected."

"Of course, we don't know that all of these are related to beriberi."

Some of them must have been for unrelated ailments or injuries.

"Hm. So, which quest should we take?"

"Just from what I can see, none of them."

I wasn't an expert on medicine in this world, but I knew that herbs couldn't cure beriberi. There would have been a chance if any of the quests had wanted soybeans or potatoes.

"Which means that doctors in this country haven't figured out how to cure

beriberi, yet.”

“Yep... This might be worse than the Edo affliction.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s walk and talk.”

In the end we left the Adventurers’ Guild without even taking a quest, while feeling some stares on our backs asking why we even bothered to become adventurers. We headed toward the shop of the merchant who bought my watch.

“Explain what the Edo affliction is first,” Tiamat asked, as we walked through the main street side by side.

“Mm-hm.”

The Edo affliction was another name for beriberi in Japan. It came from most cases of the disease occurring in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), whereas in the countryside, there were almost no examples of it. People with the disease who moved to the countryside even saw their symptoms subside.

“How strange.”

“Yep. But not once they figured out why. Edo at the time was wealthy, and the epicenter of culture.”

And the height of luxury at the time was white rice. Apparently, even the lowly samurai who moved there from the country ate white rice just to keep face. Once out in the country, they ate brown and wild rice instead of white rice, which naturally treated the beriberi.

“So silver rice was the problem?”

“No. If that were the case, all of us in modern-day Japan would be dying from beriberi.”

I wondered what percentage of modern-day Japanese people ate brown rice regularly. There were important differences in meals from the Edo period and meals in modern day: the amount of rice each person ate, as well as the variation and amount of sides.

“At the time, they ate about two kilos of cooked rice a day. Per person.”

“How hearty.”

That was a little surprising, in my opinion. That’s about ten large bowls of rice. While their love for carbs was astonishing, so was their lack of sides. In fact, lunch was just about the only meal with any semblance of a side, which was usually a small grilled fish. As for breakfast and dinner, they might have had a few slices of pickled vegetables, as well as miso soup in the morning.

“How did they live like that? They were much more physically active than people in modern day, surely.”

“Carbs are energy. They did have plenty of fuel, at least.”

“I see. That’s why you asked Garish if he exercised,” Tiamat recalled.

I nodded. Exercise improves metabolism, which spends more and more vitamin B1 to break apart the carbohydrates.

“And a lot of vitamin B1 can be found in brown rice, or the bud to be specific. It wouldn’t be a problem...”

“If they didn’t throw that nutrient away by refining the rice.”

“Bingo.”

“Why don’t you and other modern-day Japanese people suffer from beriberi? You eat white rice, don’t you?”

“Vitamin B1 comes in other foods, too. Pork, eel, cod roe, soybean, potatoes.”

“That a good variety.”

“Mm-hm. If you eat a balanced diet, you usually won’t get beriberi. Pork, especially, is the superstar.”

“Oh. I think I’m beginning to see what you’ll prescribe.”

“I think so. Food culture is another thing, too.”

For example, I couldn’t expect a Muslim person eat pork, even for their health. While for different reasons, pork had been avoided by most people during the Edo period. There was even a poem from the time that reads *Yang Guifei Such a pretty face but eats pork meat*. Apparently, this was a poem

expressing disgust towards the Chinese affinity for eating pork. A divide in food culture could run deep. Personally, I love the dish Genghis Khan, but many people in mainland Japan don't enjoy lamb. It's so good, though.

"That's why we're seeing the merchant."

"Yep. It's a good connection I wasn't expecting to make. It's our chance to ask some things about food in Azur."

"You didn't seem too heartbroken when handing over your watch. So this was your plan all along. Quite the strategist, you are."

That was not true. I was heartbroken, and the decision was very difficult. I just knew that we couldn't do anything without money, just like in my world, and we had absolutely no other way to procure any than to hand over my watch. Now that my watch was gone, though, I wanted to get the most out of it I could. It was the least I could do out of respect for my dear Chronograph.

8.

The shop we arrived at was nearly as big as the Adventurers' Guild.

"As expected, I'd say," I mumbled.

This shop belonged to the merchant who purchased my wristwatch. From how easily the man had struck up a hundred-gold-coin (or ¥1M) deal, I had estimated the scale of this man's finances. I would have hesitated to make even a 100,000 yen purchase. I would've hesitated a lot. In any case, if this man was a successful merchant, that was all the better. A successful merchant surely had considerable influence in this town.

We entered the shop with a greeting. Immediately, an apprentice or sales clerk welcomed us.

"Welcome! Are we looking for anything in particular today!?"

It was an energetic voice that belonged to a young girl with brown hair and eyes. Her small stature seemed ready to burst with excitement. As far as I could tell, her age was around fifteen or sixteen. If I had seen her in Japan, I would have pegged her to be in high school, but it was really difficult to guess the age

of this world's residents from their appearance. I could never be sure.

"My name is Eiji. The shopmaster and I struck a deal earlier. Has he returned?"

"Yes! We've been expecting you! This way, please!"

She showed us the way with a great smile. It seemed like the merchant had already set things up.

Tiamat and I followed the girl. The shop had a spacious interior too, and I could see a few customers looking at the items on display and speaking with some of the employees. All in all, business seemed well.

"Oh, Sir Eiji. I'm so glad to see you," Milon, the shopmaster, greeted us.

He was a portly, middle-aged man like Mister Garish at the Adventurers' Guild. He invited us to his table, where he seemed to conduct his business negotiations.

"I hope we weren't too early."

"Of course not. I have been looking forward to your arrival... Oh, excuse me."

As we were walking together and chatting, Mister Milon tripped... on air. He reached for the table to hold himself up.

"..."

He could barely lift his toes. He was afflicted also; it was only natural. Mister Milon was wealthy, had plenty of food on his table, and seemed to move around a lot since he was busy running his business. He checked plenty of the boxes.

"Mister Milon, how are you lately? Do you feel lethargic at all?" I asked, as I took my seat at the table. It's not worth noting, but Tiamat managed to sit up in a chair, too. Wasn't her tail in her way? How did the chair support her weight?

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing..."

"Yes, I do feel lethargic. My doctor told me to get out of the shop and get some exercise, so I've been walking quite a bit, but it's not doing much.

Although,” he concluded, “I suppose the silver lining is that I’ve run into you and a good deal on one of my walks.”

Pleasantries aside, that doctor...! Vitamin B1 can’t be made by photosynthesis. What was the point in making him exercise?

“Hm. This is grave, isn’t it? This doctor’s prescription would only worsen his symptoms,” Tiamat said, crooking her neck.

At the same time, her chair creaked.

Just don’t break the chair, please... I couldn’t help but plead silently.

“Ignorance isn’t a sin. Something like this was a common case in history, I think.”

“Is everything all right? Sir Eiji? Miss Tiamat?” Mister Milon asked, suspicious of our whispering.

“In fact, Mister Garish has also been troubled with lethargy. We have just started to take some action against this seemingly widespread condition.”

“Oh, that is wonderful news! I would love to have mine treated, too.”

“Yes, of course.”

I returned a smile. This was my opening.

“Do you know of anyone else with similar symptoms, by the way?”

“Yes, quite a few.”

Mister Milon’s expression shifted, his cheerfulness fading as he grew somber.

“I hear that many of them have lost the ability to walk, and have passed away,” he added, with somewhat of a hushed tone. I hadn’t realized how bad the situation was; I had to hurry.

“Have you heard of anyone who improved after leaving Lishua?” I asked.

“No... Not that I know of.”

“I see.”

All right. This wasn’t the beriberi that became widespread during the Edo period but the beriberi that was an epidemic during the Meiji and Taisho

period, when commoners could begin to regularly eat white rice after the improvements in rice refinement technology: the beriberi known as one of the two diseases the Japanese were most affected by in history. Things were much worse than I had thought.

During the Edo period, the symptoms of beriberi subsided somewhat just by the patient moving to the countryside. In addition to eating less white rice, the patient would have more access to soba noodles, beans, and potatoes. Surely the economic disparity between the city and the countryside must have been a factor, but I assumed that there was a sort of general knowledge on how to prevent beriberi.

Possibly through old wives' tales; they can be more on the mark than one might expect. It isn't too uncommon, for example, for tsunami predictions calculated by a pinnacle-of-modern-technology super computer and the predictions given by the fishermen according to their generations-old signs to match up.

When Mister Mightier-Than-Thou Piece-of-Shit Hero overwrote entire cultures in this world, he made sure to stomp right over the failsafe that is cumulative knowledge. I was so thankful, I would have bowed to that hero in worship if I could have... and begged for the smiting to stop.

"Mister Milon. Your lethargy is caused by an illness. Without treatment, you will die."

"No..."

"We will treat it. Not just you and Mister Garish, but we will treat all who are afflicted."

"Oh, mighty Hermits..."

"But I need your help, Mister Milon."

"Anything."

He pounded his chest. As a powerful merchant, he might have expected us to ask for his help in the financial department. We would get to that eventually, of course, but not for a while.

“First, I need to know your diet. Do people eat pigs here?”

“\$%&? What is that?”

The word he used was unintelligible. I glanced at Tiamat, who nodded.

“Since the word doesn’t exist in this world, it seems it wasn’t translated. Of course, Milon doesn’t know what it is, either.”

“I see.”

Pigs aren’t entirely a product of nature on Earth, after all. They were originally boars. Through a painstakingly long time (since the ancient Mesopotamian civilization) the species was gradually modified to become livestock. Different worlds lead to different civilizations and histories. This was only natural.

“Do you know what boars are, then?”

“Do you mean gagd? A magibeast species?”

It seemed that he understood this time. The different name for it wasn’t a big deal, as long as knew that they existed.

“Do you ever eat them?”

“Are they edible? I imagine hunters may eat them on occasion, but I have never seen them in shops.”

“Hm.”

While he hadn’t eaten the pork variant before, it seemed that people in Lishua didn’t have an aversion to eating meat. That alone was an important piece of information to gain.

I went down my mental list of foods rich in vitamin B1 in the same manner. As a result, eel was a no-go. Mister Milon couldn’t even understand what sort of creature it was. While he knew of soybeans and potatoes, they were not commonly eaten by humans here. Apparently, those were mainly used as feed for their livestock, which was a creature akin to the ostrich or emu. That was a major food for them. I wondered if it would taste good; its taste aside, though, I didn’t know and didn’t have any way of finding out how much vitamin B1 the particular meat contained. *I shouldn’t count on it*, I thought.

The other option was brown, unrefined rice, but this was out of the question too. Mister Piece-of-Shit Hero had instilled the technology of refining rice at the same time as introducing the crop itself. Everyone in Azur had it in their minds that rice is, and will always be, white. No matter how much I campaigned for eating brown rice and its nutritional value, I doubted that I could overturn the image in these people's minds that rice must be white.

In truth, it could have been possible over a long-term awareness campaign, but countless people would die in the meantime. In Japan, from the start of the epidemic in the early Meiji period until a decade into the Showa period (when the quality of food declined across the board due to World War II) about 10,000 to 20,000 people died to it annually over those seven decades or so. According to a quick calculation, that adds up to more than a million.

Don't you get it, Mister Piece-of-Shit Hero? You're about to kill off so many more than the oh-so-evil Demon Lord ever did.

9.

I had decided on a direction to take. I would popularize soybeans and potatoes, currently used as livestock feed, as food for humans. If soybeans were presented as edamame and potatoes as french fries, I doubted that anyone would consider them livestock feed. This was my first-aid.

In the meantime, I would hunt gagd and normalize eating it. Luckily, the people here didn't seem to have an aversion to eating meat. My guess was that if it tasted good, people would eat it. As long as it tasted good, people had no problems eating pigeons that symbolized peace or killer whales that ruled the sea.

"Let's start by making edamame. Even I can cook up something like that."

"Shall I prepare some soybeans, then?" Mister Milon offered.

I was just thinking about getting some at the market, so him taking care of that would be great.

"If you don't mind. Green, unripe ones in their shell. It's fine if they're sold by the branches, too. I'll also need salt and water. Oh, is salt valuable here?"

“It’s far from free. The soybeans are cheap, though.”

So salt cost a considerable amount. Of course, salt in modern day did seem too cheap, in a way. In any other time in history, it was a precious commodity; wars had been started over sources of salt. On the other hand, I couldn’t boil edamame without salt. Some expenses couldn’t be avoided.

“That’s fine. We’ll need a good amount of it. Specifically, we’ll need about 40 grams of salt for every 300 grams of soybeans.”

They didn’t use the metric system in this world, so the actual quantity and units of measurement Mister Milon heard must have been different.

“I can get that, no problem. In fact, I can pull that much from my kitchen,” he said with a laugh.

With a long-term production plan in mind I knew I had to properly stock up, but this was just a test run.

Soon, at Mister Milon’s orders, one of the employees from the shop brought over some edamame on their branches. It was the same girl who had welcomed us when we first arrived.

“Here they are, Dad!”

“Call me ‘Boss’ when we have customers. How many times do I have to tell you, Millia?”

“Sorry!”

A heartwarming exchange. It seemed that the girl was Mister Milon’s heir.

“What am I going to do with this one? She’s nearly sixteen and has no prospect for a marriage. Where did I go wrong?”

Mister Milon chuckled with humility, but it was clear as day how much he cared for his daughter. I was willing to bet that he would be bawling at Miss Millia’s wedding.

“Why doesn’t she give it a try while she’s here? It’s an easy dish to cook.”

“Dish? I thought you were making medicine.”

“Hermits don’t believe that pills should be hard to swallow.”

I gave a bogus response to Mister Milon's question. I couldn't very well have called edamame a medicine.

The three of us (plus the dragon) moved to the kitchen. This really wasn't a difficult dish. I was sure that they would be able to cook it themselves after watching me do it once. In fact, they didn't even need to recreate my process faithfully. I only remembered it from a life hack show that was playing on NHK (Japan's national TV station) a few years back. This was just a method of boiling the beans that made them plump. Edamame that was simply boiled tasted fine, too.

I took the edamame shells off of their branches and massaged some salt into them after cutting off both ends. I boiled the water in a pot, put in the salt and 300 grams worth of edamame, then let it cook for three to five minutes. I had used a liter of water in the pot, rubbed in ten grams of the salt and used the other thirty grams in the pot. Once they were boiled, I drained them in a colander before fanning the steam away. That was it.

"How easy. You call this cooking, Eiji?"

"To be honest, you don't even have to be this exact with the ratio."

I decided to give Tiamat something more to roll her eyes about. Milon and his daughter stared at what they only knew to be livestock feed. The fresh edamame shone a vibrant, verdant green.

"The shell is inedible, so try pushing the beans out with your fingers, like this."

I popped out a few beans onto a plate and ate them myself. It didn't taste too bad. Being in early summer helped too, as that was the harvest season for edamame. A little bit later in the year and it would have been off-season. In other words, I was just in time arriving before midsummer, when beriberi would be at its worst.

Tiamat chucked some edamame into her mouth. While they were still in their shells.

"I told you, you can't eat the shells."

"Don't sweat it. Totally edible."

“Thanks for the input, Miss Dragon!”

“Hm. Delicious. Perfect amount of salt.”

“Is that so...?”

Was she really tasting them? I doubted it.

After watching our little comedy routine, Milon and his daughter timidly reached for the edamame. Animals ate it, after all, which meant that it at least wasn't harmful to the human body. What was bothering them was their reservation of eating what they considered to be for livestock. Often, people discover some foods they can really enjoy once they get past the preconceptions they have about them.

“Ooh! These are quite...!”

“It's so good!”

Their eyes widened. As it was only seasoned with salt, its taste was simple, and therefore approachable. More complex and deep flavors required a developed palette to appreciate. Take it from me, who had a palette so cheap that I didn't find foie gras or truffles particularly tasty.

“There are soybeans grown especially for edamame that are selectively bred for it.”

“Those taste better than these, then?” Mister Milon asked with much enthusiasm, as he popped one bean after another into his mouth.

Of course, this wasn't a dish one should be concerned with table manners while eating.

“I would think so.”

I couldn't give an educated answer, as I was neither a farmer nor a foodie.

“I bet we could sell these, Dad!” Miss Millia said, with a beaming smile.

All right, let's calm down for a second.

This wasn't a tasting for a new food product.

“For now, I need you to eat a lot of these. What do you think?”

After clearing my throat, I got us back on track.

“This will treat my lethargy?”

“That’s right. Really, I would like you to eat about 600 grams of it every day...”

The recommended daily value for vitamin B1 is about 1.4 milligrams. I remembered that there was about 0.24 milligrams of it in 100 grams of edamame. That adds up to 600 grams a day, if edamame was going to be his sole source of vitamin B1. While brown rice has about half the vitamin B1 per gram as edamame, it would feel more natural as rice was something people ate every day. It would be rather difficult to eat 600 grams of edamame each and every day.

“That’s a bit much. I wouldn’t mind a day or two. It tastes good.”

“Thought so...”

That was the hole in my plan. Unlike beans or potatoes, there was no way that people could eat enough of it every single day.

“Can’t you just cook them differently?” Tiamat interrupted.

She was chomping on the edamame, still in their shells. Despite the good point she just made, it wasn’t convincing at all. She could eat 600 grams or even a kilogram every day, I was sure.

“That’s true. But I don’t know how else to cook them.”

I was a bachelor, living with my parents. I could count on my fingers how many dishes I knew how to cook. Oh, how would I ever impress my future husband?

“How useless. That’s hardly news, though.”

“Well excuse me!”

“We can come up with changes to the recipe! It’s soft, so we can do a lot with it!”

Miss Millia pounded her chest. There’s someone who knew the shortcut to a man’s heart.

“Mister Eiji! We can sell these here, right!?”

Her eyes were gleaming with excitement. It seemed her interest was business, rather than a relationship.

“Keep them affordable, please. They are to treat people with beriberi, after all.”

“Don’t worry, sir! We’ll throw our profit margin out the window!” she declared.

But would they really? There was little I could do, even if I had my doubts. I had no distribution route nor method of advertisement. In this department, I really needed the help of a merchant.

“Don’t go too crazy,” I chuckled.

10.

This is a weird way of putting it, but I am an adult. Not for being of a certain age or for having sexually matured, but because of the years I had survived out in the workforce. I worked a job and I got paid for it.

For many, making excuses was no longer an option out in the real world. Through high school, for example, the only unreasonable adult one might come in contact with would be their teacher or parent. Once in the workforce, though, everyone one met could be one. Bosses, coworkers, subordinates... most of them are unreasonable. And so, you become one of the unreasonable adults, too. Society is a lot more complicated than the textbooks make it out to be.

“I’m grown up enough to recognize that kind of thing, in my experience.”

“Hm. I have no idea what you’re trying to say. What’s the connection between you being an adult and us living with Milon?”

I had spent a good portion of the day speaking to Mister Garish at the Adventurers’ Guild and later cooking at the shop. It was nearly dusk. While my pockets were full from selling my wristwatch, it would have been a hassle to start looking for a place to stay at this hour. And I was tired. I just wanted to take a bath and go to bed. So, Mister Milon offering us a bed at his house was of great help.

“It means I’m grown up enough to not turn away goodwill.”

“But won’t it cause trouble later if we become too close to one particular merchant? You’re more of the expert on the subject.”

“You’re right.”

I was an employee of the government. Even when buying some miniscule stationary at the office, we had to make sure not to order too much from one particular company or the other. The most feared outcome was to be accused of favoritism.

In our case, we had to avoid people thinking that the Hermits had a vested interest in Mister Milon’s business.

“But we need connections, in any case. The names of those connections don’t really matter.”

Even if we did turn down Mister Milon’s offer, we would have to create connections with some merchant in the future. No one would buy edamame from us off the street, after all. If we aimed to make connections with each of them anyway, there was no point in shopping around for a special merchant now. It seemed better to cherish the connection we’d stumbled upon.

“I see. This the grown-up response, then?”

“You get it?”

“I thought you only accepted because you didn’t want to go back out on the streets tonight.”

“N-N-N-No way, José!”

“I won’t ask you why you won’t look me in the eye, but we have a bigger problem ahead of us.”

Rolling onto the bed provided, Tiamat changed the subject. On her stomach, she had her arms outstretched and her tail curled. She reminded me of a cat starting to make itself comfortable.

“Edamame alone won’t cover the necessary nutrients, right?”

“That’s true. I’ve got to think this one through...”

I laid down, too. Not that it mattered, but we were sharing a room. Just wanted to mention that one of us was male and the other female.

In any case, since reverting to eating brown rice wasn't an option, the people of this world had to get the necessary nutrition from non-rice dishes. Edamame wasn't a sustainable option. While it was reasonable and tasty, there wasn't enough variety in ways to cook it.

"Research may be needed to validate the lack of variety," Tiamat chuckled.

"I'm sorry."

The lack of alternate uses of the edamame was my fault. But what was I supposed to do? I'm a public worker, not a chef.

"What about the other foods you've mentioned? Like potatoes or pollock roe?"

"The season for potato harvest depends on when they were planted. Technically they can be harvested year-round."

There was a slight problem to make potatoes a common food, though: their eyes are toxic. While it would only cause minor food poisoning and wasn't fatal in any way, it was a little dangerous to advocate eating potatoes without proper advisory.

The pollock roe was even more troublesome, because of the season. The Alaska pollock fishing season is the middle of winter. There was no way for me to obtain any in early summer, let alone the fact that I didn't know how to process it.

"And you call yourself a Dosanko."

Dosanko being what people from Hokkaido call themselves.

"Nowadays, I'm sure many Dosanko don't know how to clean fish."

"The times we live in."

"Even if I knew how to clean them, it's doubtful that they gillnet in this country."

"It seems we'll need to do more research on seafood."

“Looks like it.”

We would have to look for other foods while edamame held them over. The realistic option seemed to be the gagd.

“Let’s hit up the guild again tomorrow. We have to find out things like where they live and how to hunt them.”

“You’re going to hunt them?”

“Don’t make me laugh; I’ll hire a hunter. Or that’ll be your job, Tia.”

“The antithesis of self-reliance,” Tiamat said, with a giant yawn.

The next morning.

As I was washing my face at the well in the courtyard, Mister Milon appeared. Compared to the previous day, he looked much better.

“Good morning. How do you feel today?”

“I can’t remember the last time I’ve woken up without feeling sluggish.” he responded, with a smile.

While one might wonder how a single night could make such a difference, beriberi is an ailment caused by malnutrition. When the body is provided with the necessary nutrition, it healed at a remarkable speed. With plenty of vitamin B1 and a week or so of rest, his symptoms would completely subside. However, since the diet of the people of Azur Kingdom perpetually lacked vitamin B1, his symptoms would come right back unless we made a drastic, nation-wide change to people’s diets.

“That’s great to hear. Keep eating those edamame.”

“I had some this morning already. It’s refreshing enough to have for breakfast. The problem is...”

“The problem is?”

“That it makes me want some ale, I suppose.”

“Ah-ha. I agree with you there.”

The merchant’s sense of humor put a smile on my face. Ale was a form of

beer that was quite common in fantasy fiction. While there was a distinction in taste between ale and the common lager beer from modern-day Japan, they were both beer. How could ale not be good with edamame?

“You can’t drink for a while, though.”

“You break my heart.”

“It won’t be too long.”

“I’ll be looking forward to the day, Sir Eiji.”

We had already explained to Mister Milon that we wanted to obtain some gagd. While not nearly as much as pork, boar meat contained some vitamin B1. About the same amount per weight as edamame, in fact. However, meat could be a real dish.

That was huge; people could eat it every day. Boar meat was nutritious all around, too. High protein, low calorie, and abundant in minerals... I was almost sure, although I couldn’t be quoted on it as I didn’t remember the exact amount.

“Are you headed off to the guild today?”

“Yes. I don’t know about Tia, but I’m not a hunter. I need to post a quest or hire a hunter outright.”

“Don’t worry about the financial aspect. We are ready and willing to support you on that front.”

Mister Milon declared himself a sponsor. He didn’t grow his business this big on dumb luck; he knew how to strike when the iron was hot. Feeling the change in his condition, he must have assessed that edamame would be a hit, along with boar meat.

“We may have the right knowledge, but we don’t have any way to spread it. Your assistance in that would be invaluable.”

“It’s my honor to aid in your endeavor, Hermits.”

We shook hands. While his response was filled with platitudes, I didn’t doubt that he was sincere in trying to achieve the same goal as I. After all, business would only go up when people were healthy.

Nothing but Problems!

1.

“...I want to go home...”

“What are you talking about, Eiji.”

“I’m tired... My feet hurt...”

“What’s the use moping over it?”

Tiamat rolled her eyes, but I couldn’t help that I was tired. We were walking down a highway under the early summer sun, the view never changing. Surely there were plenty of other people who would have been disheartened if they were in my place.

“We’ve barely walked for three hours. Get yourself together.”

“Urf...”

I hobbled along, using a random branch I found as a walking stick. Fancy dress shoes were never meant to be worn for long walks.

“A salesman’s job is mostly legwork.”

“I’m more of an office worker.”

Just a little public worker. The most manual labor I’d done was planting flowers in front of the building. Even during my student days I never spent a day on a sports team.

“Weakling.”

The dragon’s fangs clicked together. Apparently, that was a laugh. The difference between a dragon’s physicality and a human’s aside, I was simply too weak. How were all of those Isekai protagonists so physically active? Some of them who had spent a few years never leaving their room should’ve had less endurance than me, if anything.

“Damn cheat codes.”

“You might want to curse your old age instead. Most of those protagonists are high schoolers, aren’t they? A big difference from a man in his thirties.”

That was harsh. It wasn’t like I turned thirty by choice.

“Any complimentary rides on your back, Tia?”

“Sure. If you can figure out how to stay on it.”

She walked on her hind legs. Her height was similar to mine at 180cm or so. Accounting for her thick and sturdy tail, she would have been over 195cm easily.

“Piggy-back style?”

“Idiot.”

Couldn’t argue with that. I couldn’t hold onto her to begin with. Dangling on her neck by my arms would have been more exhausting than walking.

“Not that I can’t walk on all fours. I don’t think it’ll be all that comfortable, though.”

With that, she put her arms / front legs down on the ground. Since those were shorter than her hind legs, her back sloped down to the front. It seemed terrifying to ride like that.

“Here. Hop on.”

I did. My feet still touched the ground.

“Thought so...”

We were nearly the same height. What was I supposed to do with my legs while riding on the back of someone my own height?

“Bend your legs. We’ll try this out.”

“A-All right.”

As soon as I managed to bend my knees, Tiamat started running. Thud. Thud. Thud.

“Graough!! Ow! Ow! My butt’s going to crack open!”

There was no saddle or anything. The bumps in the road directly shot up to my tailbone. And there was still nothing to grab onto, not even a pair of reins. Bumpy, painful, and scary from the sharp lean forward. It was the worst.

In the end, I decided to walk myself.

“I think I understand why humans almost exclusively ride horses,” I remarked as I rubbed my butt.

“There are many animals faster than the horse, and a good number of those would follow commands. The biggest reason for riding horses has to be their steady galloping form.”

A thoughtful explanation from Tiamat. I recalled a video game where I could ride an ostrich or something, but that seemed limited to the realm of fiction. I suppose horses were the go-to species for humans to ride.

“At the end of the day, I don’t even get a mode of transportation. What is this world coming to?”

“There’s no audience to hear your showboating lamentations. You have two legs your parents gave you. Why not be grateful that you were born with an able body.”

“No cheat codes. No transportation. No items. All I get is a preachy sidekick. My life sucks.”

“I see. You don’t need me, then? This is where we part ways, it seems,” Tiamat declared with a distant tone. What had I done? Our duo was at the brink of destruction. Without a doubt, I was in the wrong.

“I apologize. I didn’t mean that.”

“Remember, Eiji. We are partners. Not a master and his subject.”

“Won’t happen again, Tia.”

“Hm.”

With a light nod, my partner accepted my apology. Japanese people often get themselves in trouble because of what they say. Almost every day, some politician loses their job over saying something they shouldn’t have. While we Japanese are often seen as humble, it seems we get carried away and say too

much, too. It appeared I was no exception.

“You reading too many Isekai fantasies was a bigger contributing factor than your genetics, Eiji.”

“You got me there.”

In many Isekai stories, the protagonist is rewarded for no reason, sympathized, respected, loved, and worshiped. I must have considered that to be the norm. I’d mistakenly thought that I could disrespect Tiamat with impunity; of course that wasn’t the case.

We had spent much too short of a time together to form a powerful bond. If this was an average interpersonal relationship, we would have still been in the stone ages. Because she had appeared before me with the role of assisting me in this world, I had gotten it into my head that she would accept anything I did. Even under the most generous assumption in my favor, she was only here because it was her job.

“I was full of myself, I have to say.”

Had I learned nothing during the past 31 years of my life?

“You noticed that fact, and tried to correct the course. That’s good. It’s important to learn from your mistakes, but you shouldn’t keep them around your neck.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

I chuckled at what Tiamat said. I could hear the early summer wind rustle through the grass field.

Even a loving married couple can end up in divorce from the smallest rift in their relationship, whereas Tiamat and I had only just met. We could expect plenty of instances to come in the future when our gears wouldn’t click. That’s exactly why Tiamat told me not to drag it on. When I make a mistake, I just have to learn from it and do better next time. My partner was too good for me.

“Thanks, bro.”

“Now, Eiji. Call me old-fashioned...”

“Why?”

“...but I think that ‘bro’ should only be used man-to-man. Lest you’ve forgotten, I am a female.”

“Grrf...”

And she never forgets to educate me. She’s too good of a partner, indeed.

We had made it out here from the city of Lishua in order to hunt gagd. Apparently, they lived not too far off, but close enough to walk. We had been told that there was a forest beyond the field, which was magibeast territory. Gagd, apparently, were not one of the more dangerous magibeasts. They were also of a rather timid nature, and wouldn’t attack humans on sight. While I didn’t know how I would fare against them, we were told that Tiamat, Miss-S-Rating-All-Around, wouldn’t break a sweat. So, we decided to scope the forest out with just the two of us.

“Mister Garish deceived me...”

I mumbled as I hobbled on. When it takes a whole day on foot, that is not a walkable distance. That’s false advertising.

“A two days’ walk at your pace, Eiji. How many breaks do you need to take?”

“So it’s my fault? It’s all my fault?”

“Not that I would make the effort to understand how you feel. Do you realize that you’re making it harder on yourself every time you stop?”

“What...?”

“That’s why mountain climbers seldom sit to rest. They only set their pack down on a rock or something, and stand still for a short time.”

Once you sit down, it’s hard to get back up. Both physically and mentally, it takes a lot out of you to stand all the way up; that was Tiamat’s explanation.

“I wish you would have told me sooner...”

“Even if I did, you would have sat all the same. It’s something you have to live through to learn.”

She let out a roar of laughter.

2.

I spotted a forest in the area. We didn't walk through an area where trees appeared here and there with increasing density, but instead there almost seemed to be a line where the field ended and the forest began.

"By any natural course of time, this kind of terrain shouldn't exist."

"...Right," I answered, lacking any sort of energy.

As Tiamat had predicted, we arrived at the forest the morning after we departed... Which meant that the previous night we had slept under the stars. On the ground.

My whole body hurt. No recharging had been done. I couldn't even tell if I had slept at all.

There may be some person out there who could sleep like a baby in the darkness illuminated by nothing but the moon and starlight, without a bed or even a sleeping bag, while all sorts of beasts could be heard in the distance. That person, if they did in fact exist, was not Eiji Kazama. The fool by that particular name instead spent the whole night clinging to Tiamat out of terror.

"Nothing to be ashamed of. You know that you can't do anything in combat, so you relied on me, who could do something. That's all there was to it."

The almighty dragon laughed without a care in the world. Sure, she hit the nail on the head, but even I had a semblance of pride. There are some things in this world that men still take pride in.

"It's not the be-all-end-all. You'll just get in the way if all you can offer is some macho bravado with nothing to back it up."

"You're right, of course..."

"What you should be ashamed of is assuming that you had physical capabilities comparable to the inhabitants of this world. You had plenty of time to see that you don't."

"...Uncle."

I was a feeble, modern-day man accustomed to living the easy way. There was

no way for me to walk as fast as Mister Garish had expected, and my endurance was nowhere near his. When I stayed the night in Lishua I should have realized at least that much.

I suspected that Tiamat didn't give me prior warning on purpose. This was something I had to learn the hard way, she must have assessed. She was neither a tour guide nor a babysitter. Who was I to expect white-glove service?

At the same time, I was sure that she would be kind enough to give me advice if I were to ask for it after thinking it over on my own. In the example of my current predicament, if I had asked her whether or not she thought it possible for me to adhere to Mister Garish's ETA, she would have told me 'no.' By cutting that tiny corner I had left the city without the necessary preparations to keep me from sleeping under the stars. My luck had it that this was only a couple days' trip for me, but if it had been a more long-term endeavor I could have ended up dead.

"Moving forward, I'll make sure to ask for your advice on most things."

"Hm."

Tiamat nodded. I remember the dragon's expression resembling a smile, somewhat.

We were in the forest when I began to notice shadows in the distance peeking in and out of my vision. They were considerably large, and I pegged them to belong to magibeasts. These weren't stray cats, after all. Not a lot of wild beasts would easily show themselves to humans.

"Even on Earth, those on the top of the food chain don't hide in fear. Same logic applies here."

"Gotcha."

Perhaps there was some truth to that. In the case of humans, we simply grouped together because we couldn't hide or camouflage ourselves very well. That was our ticket to the top of the food chain on Earth. In the wild, though, it was each creature to their own. As a result the stronger individuals would be more keen to show themselves.

“I wonder where the gagd lies on the food chain. If it’s too up there, it’s not going to be easy to hunt.”

“It would be easy for me. Difficult to gauge that for humans, though.” Tiamat said, crooking her neck.

Although small in stature, she was a dragon. The tippy-top of the chain, and belonging in another dimension entirely than feeble, groveling, mortal humans. A falcon soaring in the sky and a worm crawling on the ground would naturally have different points of view. How could those who have it all sympathize with those who don’t?

“What’s with the self-pity, all of a sudden?”

Tiamat glared at me side-eyed as I was moping on.

“It’s a staple.”

“Idiot. I’m not talking about the difficulty of the hunt. You humans can’t eat your prey whole, can you?”

“Me eat you whole.”

“I am in your care.”

“So what do you mean, exactly?”

“I appreciate the lack of acknowledgment. We dragons can eat them raw, but you humans need to perform various tasks like skinning them, picking out the edible body parts, etc.”

She had a point. Come to think of it, I was sure that any wild-spirited people who would eat magibeasts alive were in the minority. Our methods of hunting differed to begin with.

“But we have ‘killing them’ in common, don’t we?”

“True. No sense debating whether hunting one is feasible or not. Let’s try it.”

Tiamat squinted. I followed her gaze to see a giant silhouette in the distance.

“There’s one. A gagd.”

“That’s not close to the size of any boar I know.”

It was easily four meters long and two meters tall. It was just, so big... And it even had some vicious-looking fangs. The creature was leaps and bounds above my expectations; it looked like it belonged in an anime. I was in a fantasy world, after all.

Could I hunt it? Not a chance.

"I want to go home..."

"No can do. It noticed us too. It seems it deemed us hostile."

The gagd slowly turned towards us. Tucking its head down, the creature kicked the ground a few times with its forefoot. Even I, without any knowledge of wild animals whatsoever, could tell that it was about to charge.

In an instant the gagd began dashing towards us with thunderous stomps that felt like they were shaking the very ground below my feet. It came towards us, knocking down some small trees. Its red eyes glowed with aggression. I estimated that we were about 250 meters apart; at the speed it was going, it would reach us very soon.

"W-W-W-W-What are we going to do!?" I yelled, scared out of my absolute mind.

"I don't know what kind of attack will kill it. I'm sure tearing its head off in close combat would do the trick."

In complete contrast to me, Tiamat observed calmly. Yeah, we didn't need to be doing any kind of analysis here.

Can't you do something, already? Like, please??

I could almost hear the magibeast's breathing. With every moment, the gagd appeared to grow in size. It was a trick of the mind, caused by my fear and the fact that the beast was approaching. It already appeared to be as big as a semi to me.

This is bad. Super-duper bad.

I was sure that I would die on impact.

"It may not be wise to let it struggle so much that it flattens you, Eiji."

Well, yeah. Very unwise indeed.

But if you stand there and do nothing, that's what'll happen anyway. Don't you see that? Hello? Miss Tiamat??

"A breath attack then, I suppose. I can't really gauge this thing. Let's try it with maximum power."

The little dragon sucked in some air, and her bluish or greenish scales began to glow silver-blue. She opened her eyes; the roaring sound came a moment later. What I was able to see was a blinding light. Laser Breath. That was the name that came to my mind as I closed my eyes from the sheer brightness. I couldn't help but feel like it was overkill. Carefully, I opened my eyes.

"I went a little too far."

Tiamat was scratching her chin with her short forelegs. I was impressed that she could do that. If the scene in front of me hadn't required my devoted attention, I would have addressed the matter. But in front of me was a straight line that must have stretched two kilometers where there were no longer any trees or anything else that used to be there. It looked as if a certain giant, god-like warrior had come through.

Naturally, the gagd was nowhere to be seen. I assumed it didn't flee but was evaporated. Without a trace. This end result didn't seem like where we should wind up on a hunting trip. 'Obliteration' was a word that better suited the picture.

"What are we going to do about this...?"

"Let's see. We can play dumb, or just run away," Tiamat said, looking to the distance.

I understood her sentiment, but why would we flee the scene?

3.

Nothing happened. When we had arrived to the forest, it was already at the state it was now. Some giant magibeast must have gone berserk. Maybe one fought another like a scene from a Kaiju movie.

“We don’t have much of an alternative. It would be pretty embarrassing for me to admit that I made my attack too powerful.”

“Uh-huh. I wasn’t worried about dignity, Tiamat.”

I didn’t have even the teeniest, tiniest, pint-sized care for that. The problem was that her attack was as powerful as a weapon of mass destruction. If people found out that Tiamat was the culprit of this, it would be a huge deal. With great power came great trouble. Those with this kind of power would be feared and eliminated, or used for nefarious means. Either way, it wouldn’t be sunshine and rainbows.

The various overpowered protagonists would make some effort to conceal their powers if they didn’t live in the realm of fiction. The only excuse for one not to do so would be if their mental capacity was that of a teenager’s. Just as the tall trees catch more wind, life becomes harder the more one showcases their talent. That’s a lesson that anyone learns once they make it out to the real world. It’s exactly why fictional protagonists possess boundless powers, and even act like they don’t have a care in the world. If you were to act that way in real life, people would fear you, use you, and hate you until you die alone. It’s sad, but that’s human nature.

Imagine that there’s someone in your school or workplace who has good grades or is good at their job, but is a massive jerk. Could you ever sincerely enjoy their company? I couldn’t. As an adult, I would maintain some sort of cordial relationship all the while wishing for their destruction.

“In short, you’re saying I should conceal my strength.”

“Yes. I personally don’t think you’ll use it for evil, but I can’t say the same for other people.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Besides, if you kept getting all the praise, I would get jealous. Not very noble of me, I know.”

I played it as a joke, but that was the truth. Tiamat was a good soul and a good partner, that much was indisputable, but having someone extraordinary at your side is an arduous task for someone extra ordinary like me. Doctor

Watson, who continued to show unchanging friendship to Sherlock Holmes despite continuously having the disparity in their intellects shoved in his face, must be of truly admirable character.

“You’re an honest man, Eiji. It may be a virtue, but it must not be easy to envy an ally.”

“Especially because you’re an ally. If you were an enemy, I’d just have to hate you. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“Part of me wants to be proud. Of what an amazing partner I have.”

It wasn’t easy because it was complicated. Intricate, perhaps. Apparently, after a mere 31 years, I was nowhere near solving the maze of the human mind.

“I’m a high-maintenance man.” I shrugged.

“You are human, after all. Tia-o.”

Tiamat smiled a smile that made things okay. My partner, indeed, had a big heart. I looked up to that.

As we continued our either fruitful or fruitless (I couldn’t tell which) conversation, something came out of the forest. A gigantic wolf appeared, walking onto the path carved out of the earth by Tiamat’s breath.

It was huge. It was bigger than huge; at least thrice as large as the gagd from earlier. It was covered in silver fur and wore a dauntless expression. Something about the creature seemed kingly.

“A Fenrir. It’s supposed to be high up the ranks of magibeasts,” the dragon explained to me.

While it may sound naïve, even I could tell that the Fenrir had no intention of attacking us. In fact, it seemed more ready for a discussion. When it reached a spot about twenty meters away from us, the wolf stopped.

“Honorable Dragon-god Princess.”

It spoke to us fluently. Yes, it was weird for a wolf to speak, but I wasn’t particularly surprised. Dragons could speak, too! In fact, the wolf’s words

surprised me more than the fact that it uttered them.

“It could tell that you’re a woman, Tia.”

“Of course it could. What male would look like this?”

I’m sorry I can’t tell a male dragon from a female dragon.

I had no idea which of her characteristics made it so obvious.

“I beg your pardon. I must inquire, with what purpose have you initiated an attack upon my territory?”

Depending on our response, the wolf would stand its ground and fight. That much was apparent from the determination it exuded. In its eyes I saw the melancholy of someone who had accepted death. Dragon versus wolf... the result of that matchup seemed clear as day. I had just witnessed Tiamat’s breath, too.

...Which seemed like more power than any one creature should have, by the way.

“That’s on me. An unfortunate accident,” Tiamat answered, scratching her chin.

That was no accident. There was no arguing that it was 100% preventable.

“Accident...!?”

“Mm-hm. I wanted to try hunting a gagd. I didn’t know how much power I needed to take it down, so I just went full force. Then, voila. Imagine my surprise.” Tiamat laughed.

Imagine your surprise? Imagine my surprise!

And there she was, blabbing about the whole thing we just swore not to tell a soul. Although, on second thought, we weren’t dealing with another human, and it already knew we were the culprits.

“You...!? Fired a Laser Breath just to take down a gagd!?”

I was glad that Mister Fenrir was also surprised. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of kinship. One-sidedly, of course.

“Mm-hm. What was I to do? It was charging at us, and Eiji could have been

caught up in the battle if it came down to close combat.”

She gave me a glance. Okay. That was true. For example, if Tiamat happened to have thrown the gagd towards me via a German Suplex or something, I would have died.

“Human...?”

The Fenrir turned his gaze to me, as if it hadn’t noticed me until this very moment. In fact, I was confident it hadn’t. How could it have noticed anything but Tiamat in this situation?

“Hm. He is technically my godfather.”

“The godfather to a Dragon-god...!”

A dash of fear entered his eyes as they stayed on me.

Wait a minute. Sure, I had named her ‘Tiamat’ but this kind of reaction was unexpected. Had I majorly screwed up?

“Don’t worry about it, Eiji. It’s an old custom. A dragon gives the honor of naming them to someone they’ve come to respect. Then they love, cherish, and hold that person dear like their own parent... Until that person’s bloodline comes to an end.”

Tiamat informed me of this with an almost musical flow. So it was a ridiculously big deal. It didn’t seem like something that should have been taken so lightly. Eh, Tia?

“...Shouldn’t you have explained that in the beginning, Tia? I just named you without a clue of any of that.”

“Old custom, like I said. I’m the dragon that’s hip with the kids, so YOLO. No need to let it bother you.”

“I’m bothered by your outdated choice of words...”

I was getting really tired, all of a sudden.

“Human...”

The next emotion that entered the wolf’s eyes was pity. Ignored, feared, and now pitied. How colorfully the wolf had received my presence. I would have put

up ads all over for anyone to take my place.

“Then, Fenrir, the gagd from earlier vanished.”

Ignoring the awkward eye contact between the wolf and I, Tiamat continued. This woman walked at her own pace.

“I want your permission to hunt some gagd in the forest. You’re the master of the forest, are you now?”

That was a request. I couldn’t help but imagine Tiamat firing her Laser Breath left and right under the excuse of experimentation. I was sure that the Fenrir imagined the same.

“If gagd is what you desire, I will have my kin bring it to you. Please, don’t move from here.”

“Hm? That’s easy for me, but I don’t want to impose.”

“It is no trouble whatsoever. Please, remain where you are.”

That seemed about right. You couldn’t really confront Tia with the fact that she would have caused more trouble by acting on her own. I understood, Mister Fenrir. Tiamat acted without much thought. She was incredibly smart and kind, but acted out of the feel of the moment more often than not. This very revelation had just struck me.

“In that case, please and thank you.”

“You can count on us.”

Mister Fenrir gave me a glance as he graciously accepted the responsibility. *I don’t envy you*, his eyes seemed to say.

4.

For the time being, we decided to sit down on the ground and wait. Tiamat was powerful enough to push past the wolf, but that would have been pointless.

“I didn’t mean to give him so much concern,” Tiamat said, as she plopped down on the ground.

“I’m sure they didn’t want their living quarters destroyed.”

“Excuse you, Eiji. The next one was only going to be at half strength.”

How different, really, was a destructive beam that reached a kilometer and one that reached half that. Potayto potahto. Let’s call the whole thing off.

“Since they volunteered, it would be better to leave it to them. I’m sure even you couldn’t fully get the hang of things after only a couple tries. There’s much to learn from failures, but it’s not like we want to become hunters, anyway.”

Our end goal wasn’t to hunt gagd. Our current objective was to popularize dishes using the gagd meat to Lishua, and eventually the entirety of Azur. Even that wouldn’t be the end of it, though. Boar meat wasn’t enough to make up for the lack of vitamin B1. Our endeavor would only be successful once we ingrained a balanced diet of sides into the culture here. The road ahead of us seemed endless, but we had to hurry. Lives were at stake. If my efforts could save even one or two lives, not trying was not an option.

“Hm? What’s wrong, Tia?”

I noticed that Tiamat was staring at me. We were already partners, so she wasn’t looking at me like she wanted to join the party.

“Nothing. I was only surprised at how earnest you are.”

“...Was I thinking out loud?”

“I mean no offense by this, but I had pegged Japanese bureaucrats to be much more lackadaisical.”

“I don’t deny that some of us are.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. When asked why they chose their profession, many bureaucrats would cite the steady pay and job security. I don’t think that’s a bad reason either. Everyone works for themselves or their family, and there is nothing wrong with that. Even bureaucrats can’t be expected to be altruistic. In my case, however, I had someone I aspired to be like.

“Who?”

“Not a direct acquaintance. Saw him on TV.”

“Oh?”

In 1986, Mount Mihara on Izu Ōshima had a major eruption. It was Mister Akita, the assistant official, who had taken command of the evacuation to get the ten thousand plus residents and tourists off the island without a single casualty. He pleaded with all sorts of institutions, did everything that needed to be done, and stayed behind on the island to watch the final rescue boat leave.

Of course, I had no direct knowledge of this event. It took place in the year I was born. I learned of it in the year 2000, through a TV program aired on the national broadcast channel. I was a fourteen-year-old middle schooler.

“I looked up to him. He was admirable. I wanted to be like him.”

“This formed your career path, then.”

“I don’t know if I was that determined about it, but... I want to help other people. That’s never left me.”

I placed my hand on my heart.

...Perhaps it was a little too cheesy.

“I see. I feel like I’ve cracked a mystery. It was curious why you worked so hard for the sake of the people in this world.”

“It’s a little embarrassing that it all started from a TV program.”

“No matter the drive behind it, good deeds are exactly that. Nothing to be embarrassed about. Ah. While we were learning about your embarrassing past, Mister Fenrir has returned.”

“So should I be embarrassed or not?”

Concealing my embarrassed grin with a chuckle, I stood. In front of us was a gagd of considerable size, as big as the one Tiamat had turned to ash. Its freshly dimmed red eyes looked up at us begrudgingly.

“Now, what will you do with it, Human?”

“You can call me Eiji.”

“Then, I permit you to address me as Baze.”

Permission was granted from a very high horse. Although, from a Fenrir’s

perspective, it had no reason to speak with a human. At best, a human could only hope to be seen as an enemy and not prey.

“I believe we need to drain its blood first.”

“Hm. How?” Tiamat asked.

“...”

How, indeed? It was a popular plot point in fantasy pieces, especially ones that focus on pioneering or survival. However, I didn't know how to take apart an animal. Even if I did, what was I supposed to do with a four-meter boar? How could those protagonists make it look so easy? Was it a skill obtainable by watching someone do it a couple of times? More importantly, how could they be so unaffected in the face of a freshly killed carcass, animal or otherwise? I was beginning to doubt that these protagonists were genuinely Japanese. Perhaps they were already hunters and gatherers.

I, in the meantime, was chickening out. Terrified, to be honest. A charging gagd was terrifying too, but a corpse was terrifying in another way.

“Hang it upside down and slit its throat,” Tiamat enlightened me.

Whether this was a necessary piece of knowledge or a trivial one, it was nice to have someone that knew the steps. Nice, but the problem was how. How were we going to hang a four-meter-long beast? I didn't have the strength to do it, and Tiamat couldn't physically do the task as she was the same size as me. Mister Baze the Fenrir was larger than the gagd, but his forelegs were not as well suited for things like holding or tying rope. We didn't even have any rope in the first place.

“What should we do...”

“I can fly up with its legs in my mouth.”

“You can fly, Tia?”

“I have them on my back. These wings aren't just for show. Ha-han.”

“Can you please start pulling gags I can understand?”

Tiamat's proposal was for her to bite down on the gagd's leg and fly up. Once it was upside down, Mister Baze would slit its throat to let out the blood. It was

the most brute-force way I could have imagined to bloodlet. I was beginning to worry that the entire area would become flooded in blood.

“Why don’t you just bite it as-is, Eiji?”

The Fenrir shook its head, nearing the edge of his patience.

“I’m not the one who’s going to eat it, Mister Baze.”

The people back at the city needed to eat it. We needed to let the blood out, and make it into a delicious dish. If the notion that gagd didn’t taste good was established, it wouldn’t be easy to retcon.

On the flip side, if the gagd dish made a good first impression on people, the dish could spread fast and wide. If that happened there would be other issues to worry about, of course, like damaging the woodlands and overhunting. Turning the gagd into livestock may be the shortcut, surprisingly enough.

“Then they should be the one to do it.”

A grin seemed to flash on the Fenrir’s face. I followed its gaze to see a hint of a dust cloud in the distance.

“A carriage is approaching. Seeing that they are screaming your name, they seem to be looking for you, Eiji.”

“You can tell from this distance?”

“The human senses are much too dull. You would never survive in the wild.”

“That’s why we formed groups, built cities, and passed down our knowledge to the next generation in order to survive.”

Baze scoffed at my generalized study of human society. Nowhere in history had there ever been a country of magibeasts. Nor an empire of demons, or a kingdom ruled by a Demon Lord. There had only ever been human nations. Didn’t this historical fact back my theory, in a way? That was exactly why Mister Baze wore a disdainful expression.

5.

Mister Garish from the Adventurers’ Guild and four other adventurers were

aboard the carriage. They had formed a search party, concerned that we hadn't returned from what was supposed to be a day trip. I was, just, terribly sorry.

One of the adventurers who accompanied Mister Garish specialized in hunting. A *deus ex machina* if I had ever seen one. Thanks to him, we succeeded at taking apart the gagd. However, not without some complications.

"Is that all you're going to call it?" Tiamat offered her criticism, accompanied by a chuckle.

Mister Garish and his group had spotted us easily. At the same time, they naturally spotted Mister Baze, the Fenrir and the King of the Forest. Anyone would have been astonished.

With that in mind, the actions the four adventurers took were surely admirable. Each of them were drained of color, but they formed a stance to guard the carriage.

"We'll hold it off! Run, Mister Garish!"

And they came out with this tearjerker. In a movie, this would have been their climax. That was, I'm sure, why Mister Baze played along...

"You dare stand in my way, humans?"

...with a line like that.

"I'll show you what humans can do when they're cornered."

This was the response by a swordsman-looking adventurer. Let's call him A for the time being.

"Yeah. I'm getting married after this gig. I can't die here."

"Taking it down counts as holding it off, right?"

Let's call them B and C. They looked like a rogue and mage, respectively. The last of them, the hunter-looking adventurer D, silently held up his necklace and kissed it, before nocking an arrow on his bow. The necklace must have been something dear to him. Left behind by his lover, perhaps. Jeez. They were practically trying to set up their own deaths.

"I admire your courage. Leave this place with pride that you've fallen to my

fangs.”

Baze made his silver, brushy hair stand. He was another problem. Why was this wolf getting so into it? Throughout this encounter, I had been poking at Tiamat with my elbow.

Say something, I was trying to communicate to her. Naturally, I was completely ignored.

With no one else to turn to, I explained our situation. It’s quite tiring to walk calm and collected into a heated play-pretend. If you don’t believe it, you should try some time. That apathetic reaction was extremely stressful, to say the least.

“To think you’ve formed a friendship with a Fenrir, Sir Eiji,” Mister Garish said, as we watched the gagd being steadily taken apart. With the adventurer experienced in the process taking the lead, things were moving smoothly. Baze and Tiamat were helping too, all buddy-buddy.

“The credit for that goes to Tia. I haven’t done a thing.”

“You’re too modest. There is such a thing, you know.”

Unfortunately for Mister Garish, I was telling the complete truth, but I decided to let it slide. It wasn’t something worth arguing over, and Tiamat’s and my accomplishments would tend to be considered one in the same, anyway. We were partners, after all.

On the other hand, if I screwed up, the shame would befall Tiamat as much as it would me. I mean, things were the same in any organization or corporation. One person’s mistake can damage everyone’s reputation. Bureaucrats like me tended to face backlash harsher than most.

“In any case, once we cut it, we need to cook it. I’m glad you came in a carriage.”

“Indeed, Sir Eiji. I can’t say I wasn’t surprised that you hadn’t thought of a method to transport the meat back to town.”

“My apologies.”

Not a shred of forethought on my end. I hadn’t thought of a single step

beyond hunting a gagd. Not about taking it apart, not about carrying the meat back to town, and not about how and where to cook it. I surprised myself that I had the gall to suggest going hunting. If it weren't for my ultra-competent partner and Mister Garish's quick thinking, I would have died a miserable death.

"Speaking of, will the meat hold until we get it to town?" I asked, as the question sprung to my mind. It was early summer. While it was comfortable weather for us, it would not be wise to keep fresh meat exposed to it for long. Because of food poisoning, and all that.

"It should be fine. It will take less than a day to get there. Besides, no one's going to die from meat that's a little spoiled."

"I suppose... No one's going to eat it raw..."

It had slipped my mind that there was no refrigeration devices in this world. Even in Japan, before the 1920's, anyone living in the mountainous areas of the country would have been hard pressed to enjoy any seafood. It wasn't that eating seafood wasn't a part of their culture, it was just a problem of transportation and preservation. Any seafood would have rotted before anyone there could have eaten it.

I remembered that the predecessors of refrigerators and frozen foods were not invented until the nineteenth century. It was only in the 1970's that those things resembled what they look like today. That was around the same time as the invention of TV dinners. Those, of course, didn't exist in this world. Even the food carried around by traveling adventurers weren't given any real best-by date. Bacteria and nutrition had not even come up as concepts in this world. Any foods that people traveled with were a mish-mash of foods that kind of seemed to last longer and foods that kind of seemed to spoil slower.

Specifically, they were dried or salted meat. Those were about the only two options they could take. Preventing the growth of bacteria by cutting out moisture; in a world oblivious to the existence of microscopic organisms, this was the method of food preservation developed through trial and error. That being said, the longest one could hope for their food to last with such a method was a week or ten days.

"We'll just boil it."

Mister Garish laughed.

“Right...”

There it was, the ‘you can eat anything if you boil it’ philosophy. Even in Japan, those who lived through the mid-and post-war impoverishment became rather obsessed with food. Basically, they couldn’t throw anything away. Even if the food was obviously spoiled, they would try to consume it, somehow.

The most common method to do so while cooking is boiling it. As a result, they could get sick. A stomachache could be laughed off, but eating spoiled food and dying from food poisoning is so ridiculous it’s not even funny, to say the least.

“We have to think about preservation and transportation, too...”

I was beginning to recognize the mountain of problems in front of me. It wasn’t just about stopping the spread of beriberi. It was clear that trying to revert the distortedly evolved world to its natural course would be no easy task. Breaking it’s the easy part, you know? Mister Piece-of-Shit Hero?

In any case, if I didn’t follow through with preserving and transporting the meat, we would soon have a scurvy outbreak on our hands... Although, treating scurvy seemed easier than beriberi, since that was caused by the lack of vitamin C.

“Oh. Lost in thought again, are we, Eiji?”

Perhaps concerned by me and my mumbling, Tiamat approached me. A blood-soaked dragon. Soaked bright red from head to toe in the blood of the gagd. It was just plain scary.

“You really are an earnest man.”

She burst out laughing. I very much wanted her never to laugh while looking like that ever again.

“I’m already here. I know that’s a cheap reason.”

“There’s nothing cheap about helping people. But, for now, why don’t we rinse off? Baze told me there’s a spring nearby.”

“Good idea. I’m a ball of sweat.”

While I was only covered in sweat and dirt, Tiamat, Baze, and the adventurers were soaked in blood. Returning to town looking like this may cause some alarm.

6.

The spring was coed. Of course, I would have been more surprised if the spring had a partition that divided itself in half to accommodate males and females separately. I'm sure chivalry would have dictated that us men waited until the ladies finished, but the female, mage-looking adventurer nonchalantly gave her approval for coed bathing.

"Just don't stare, all right?" she added.

How laid-back. Tiamat, the other lady of the group, had no qualms since she already walked around everywhere naked.

Wait. Are her scales like a layer of clothes?

With inconsequential thoughts like that, I washed up with the clear spring water. The water temperature was quite low. Although it was early summer, it felt like I would be chilled to the bone if I stayed in too long.

"Whew. I can't wait to go back to town and take a hot bath," the swordsman-looking man said, as he cleaned himself beside me. I noticed his handsome face, along with his well-toned, sabre-like body. Urgh. No, I wasn't jealous, dammit! I was an office worker!

"Oh, do Hermits take baths, Sir Eiji?"

Noticing my glance, the man asked a question with a dimpled smile. It was too bright. His cool guy aura was too much for me.

"We do, but no need for all the formalities. I'm just an F-rank."

I reciprocated the smile. Tiamat and I were both newly registered F-rank adventurers. In other words, we were barely out of orientation. On the other hand, I was told that the team that came to rescue us was solely comprised of A-ranks.

A bona fide A-Team. A certain theme song sprang to mind. In any case, it

seemed like an occupation that seniority had no place in. No sense for an ace player to address a rookie with honorifics.

“Oh, no! I wouldn’t dare risk offending a Hermit!” Mister Swordsman waved his hand in denial. “Besides, I don’t like this ranking system. Doesn’t feel right for a kid like me to act all high and mighty just ’cus I got a higher rank.”

“Is that so?”

Exchanging some vague smiles, we stepped out of the spring. While the man was shorter than me, he was almost six feet tall, which made him taller than most in this world. He quickly put on his clothes and extended his right hand.

“I’m Syfer.”

“Nice to meet you. Eiji.”

Charming, down-to-earth, didn’t let his rank get to his head, and had a handsome face and well-toned body. To top it off, Syfer had blonde hair and blue eyes. What a protagonist-type. He must have been quite the lady killer. Like I said, I wasn’t jealous, dammit. I was engaged myself.

“You said you don’t like the ranking system?” I asked, glancing at the rest of the party still in the spring. It seemed like we would have a few moments to talk.

“I’m only seventeen. I’m just a kid with a few more muscles than most, and I know how to swing a sword. But since my abilities on my registration card were high, I got a lot of sweet gigs.”

“Really?”

“Lucrative stuff, both in pay and glory. Went through a bunch of those, and I’m A-rank before I know it. Just two years into the business. What do you think, Mister Hermit?”

“Hm...”

I had to think about this. In the world of bureaucracy, it’s uncommon to see anyone climb a ladder much faster than others. In most cases, seniority rules. No matter how much talent one displays on the job, no one is promoted based on accomplishments.

What about in private corporations? While connections must matter anywhere, I'm sure some private businesses promoted people based on their performance. In two years, though? Not a chance. It's hard to imagine that someone would be anywhere beyond a step above a rookie after only two years in the business. They wouldn't even be self-sufficient at that point.

Perhaps I had to compare this to a much more performance-oriented career than a 9-to-5, like professional sports. How about a professional baseball player? Could a star player get away with talking down to someone in the Minors? Of course not.

From what I have heard, people in those career paths are even more particular about etiquette. There are players straight out of high school, and players out of college. Some are drafted later in life, and some people join the team through trades or free agent negotiations. Their time spent in a particular team varied, too.

The only thing they could use to set up a hierarchy in such a situation is age. Regardless of their time spent on the team and their position in it, older members are respected and younger members are looked after. A nicer way of putting this would be to say that one's experience in life matters more than their experience in the business.

In Syfer's case, he would have still been a high-schooler in Japan. It was only natural that he was unsure of what to do with the sparkly title given to him.

"I see. I am fourteen years your senior, Syfer. You don't mind if I speak frankly with you?" I said, speaking frankly already.

"Of course not! Wait, you're 31, Sir Eiji!?" he replied with joy and surprise at once. This young man was a multitasker.

"You're almost my father's age! Do Hermits not age!?"

"No, no. Of course we do. I'm not even fit. My whole body hurts from walking all day yesterday and today."

Sadly, it was true. I wondered if my muscles would ever be released from soreness.

"Perhaps you just need to train better, Sir Eiji?"

“Maybe I’ll start working out once we’re back in town.”

I shrugged. While a tireless body might have been unachievable, I wanted to be better than spending two days one-way on a journey the average citizen of Azur could make round trip in a single day.

“Oh, I can help you with that. Even just doing the basics would make a big difference, I think.”

Apparently, Syfer was willing to get me into shape. While grateful, I turned down his offer with a smile. Carrying on the baseball comparison, that would be like a little leaguer taking private lessons from a major league star. There would be nothing the little leaguer could learn if the star had any prowess at all. I would have felt too much guilt to use up Syfer’s, or any A-rank adventurer’s, valuable time for such a fruitless activity.

“A nice excuse. The real reason, if I were to put money on it, is that you don’t want to get yourself into what must be rigorous training led by an A-rank adventurer.”

Coming out of the spring with immaculate timing, Tiamat spouted some accurate nonsense.

Come on, you’re making me blush. I’m just a feeble bureaucrat.

In a Japanese period drama, I would have been the one killed three minutes into the episode, or a face in the crowd killed in the climactic sword fight.

“It’s true that I can’t argue any part of the assessment you’ve just made, Tia, but it’s also true that I wouldn’t be able to stand taking time away from Syfer’s life.”

Time is a precious commodity. On top of that, the people of Azur lived much shorter lives than I would.

“Then pay Syfer for his time. You can’t deny, also, that you should get some sort of training.”

Dammit. My partner seemed dead set on getting me to exercise, but I wasn’t done. My heart remained yet unbroken.

“I have no money to hire an A-rank adventurer.”

“How do you know without asking the price? What do you say, Syfer? Just for two hours, each morning. How much would it take to occupy you for that long?” Tiamat asked, with a half-grin on her face.

“How about three silver coins a day?”

That was the equivalent of paying him about 1500 yen an hour. Maybe doable for a couple of sessions, but that wasn’t a price I could afford day after day.

“I can’t afford...”

“Now, now. Don’t rush to conclusions. Let’s ask Syfer’s comrades if that price is adequate. What do you say, adventurers?” Tiamat asked the adventurers as they emerged from the spring.

“Way too high. You kidding me?” said the rogue-looking man.

“I would ask if he didn’t mean to say a different type of coin.” said the mage-looking woman.

“Rip off...” said the hunter-looking, older gentleman.

It was unanimous.

“Wrong coin, huh? Fine. Three bronze coins it is.”

Syfer corrected his price. To 300 yen. Only 150 yen an hour. Despite the ridiculous price-slash, he was sitting there smiling.

“Hm. It’s done, then. Aren’t you glad, Eiji? You now have a combat trainer,” Tiamat declared, as cheerful as ever.

I could smell the corruption from a mile away!

7.

The wheels of the carriage turned with heavy clunking as it headed straight for Lishua. Mister Garish was the one holding the reigns as I sat next to him; the rest of the party members were on foot.

We had loaded up the carriage with gagd meat to the point where there was no room for anyone to sit in it. Five hundred kilos of it, easy. This was after discarding the guts, head, spine, and other parts of the carcass no one knew

how to cook or use, yet it still ended up being close to the maximum load capacity of the carriage.

As a result, the adventurers ended up walking home. Syfer the swordsman, Yuri the ranger, Maley the mage, and Gorun the archer, as I had just been introduced. Tiamat the dragon and Baze the Fenrir also walked with them. I felt bad for getting special treatment, but my butt hurt pretty bad. There wasn't even the concept of suspension, after all.

The reason I was the only one aboard the carriage wasn't complicated at all, though. If everyone matched my pace on foot, the trip would take much longer. My feelings were not unhurt. While making it back to town wasn't exactly an emergency, it was naturally better to be quick since we were carrying raw meat.

"At this rate, we'll be back in town by sundown," Mister Garish said.

That was a quick rate. What was unbelievable to me was the speed of the party on foot. Despite chatting and walking, they were going as fast as I could jog. What did they eat to make them this strong?

"That's great. If we approach the city gates at night with Baze in tow, I think we'd be attacked before being asked any questions."

"Oh, no. No one would dare attack."

I heard a hint of a chuckle in his response. Evidently, a Fenrir wasn't a creature that could be taken on so easily. A party of four A-rank adventurers were ready to die fighting it, after all. The soldiers who guarded the capital would surely win eventually from the sheer difference in numbers, but who knew how many people would be sent to the underworld in the process? If a pair of Hermits were to bring such a magibeast to the gate, the guards very well might surrender.

"I'm not looking to make a scene..."

I glanced at Baze, who was walking alongside the carriage. The lord of the Fenrir had requested to accompany us on our journey back to the city. His reason was to discuss hunting grounds with us if humans were to start hunting gagd. A little premature, I couldn't help but think. I wasn't even sure that gagd meat would be accepted by the people here.

I suspected that he intended this to be more of a jab towards the humans than a realistic negotiation. In any case, the matter of hunting grounds affected the life and death of the Fenrir. It would not have been wise for him to stand idly by.

“Of course, I can’t rule out that all that could just be an excuse for him to come sightsee,” I mumbled.

I doubted that the lord of the Fenrir would leave his forest for such a trivial motivation, but I also felt no sense of any determination from Baze at the moment, as he trotted along while chatting away with Tiamat.

Back to the subject of gagd: I personally had none of the skills necessary to cook it. For some reason most of the Isekai protagonists knew their way around the kitchen suspiciously well. How much cooking practice did you expect an unmarried man living with his parents to have? It was nothing to brag about, but I had only ever made ramen and instant curry at this point. And maybe edamame.

“If you can call boiling something ‘cooking,’ you do have some experience in the department, Eiji,” said my partner.

How, or why, did those protagonists cook like professional chefs? Was it a prerequisite for them to graduate culinary school before being summoned on an adventure?

Therefore, it wasn’t my job to cook the gagd meat we had obtained.

After entering Lishua without issue, we headed to the kitchen provided by Mister Milon, the merchant. The kitchen came completely equipped with chefs. What hadn’t this man done for us?

“And what have you done for us, Eiji?”

“Cutting deep, Tia. Look who’s about to cry. I am.”

Spent two days trekking a half-day hike; had Baze hunt the animal; watched Syfer and the rest of the party take it apart; used the carriage provided by Mister Garish to transport it; and Mister Milon had prepared both the kitchen and the chefs. It looked like I had achieved some sort of world record of uselessness.

“You don’t seem as bothered by that as you say you are.”

“Leave it to the professionals, I say. No sense lamenting about or envying someone over something that is beyond my capabilities.”

I shrugged. I had no combat skills and no physical endurance; that much would never stop being true. The same could be said about my miniscule connections and influence. This was nothing out of the ordinary. Naturally, there was only so much a single person could do. Anyone would come to that conclusion after living life for three decades.

“I contributed knowledge. That has to earn me some mark.”

“Mm-hm. Definitely not full marks, though.”

As we watched on during our meaningless chatter, the gagd meat was being cooked. Some of it was sliced thin and stir-fried with some vegetables, some was simmered in a pot, and some was ground into patties. In any case, each method aimed to serve the meat as a side dish.

That was requested by me, and the recipes for each were provided by Tiamat. While she couldn’t cook, of course, her data bank of trivia contained the right portions for each ingredient, and she could suggest substitutes from foods available in this world.

“The problem is spice. There just isn’t as much variety as there is in Japan,” she said.

“It can’t be helped, though, can it? I’d be spooked if there was as much variety.”

“Still, with little more than salt and herbs, we can’t vary the seasoning. Won’t that become an issue if you want the people to eat this habitually?”

“You might have a point...”

No matter how tasty the dish, it becomes bland after eating it day after day. However, I imagined that since meat was already being consumed by the people of Azur, they might have some spices at home. All we wanted from this first step was for people to think that gagd meat was the tastier choice.

Eventually, the transformed gagd was presented before us with a side of ale.

Yep. Well, that was expected. I had the same thought back the Adventurers' Guild, and at Mister Milon's manor, but I was reminded again that most people in this country liked to drink. Almost as if they drank alcoholic drinks instead of water.

"Then, let's dig in."

I started things off by taking a bite, hoping to provide somewhat of a psychological encouragement. Many of them had never eaten such a food. I worried that it might be difficult for someone else to volunteer.

I had taken a bite of the vegetable stir-fry, which looked normal. Served with plenty of vegetables, it had the potential of a real side dish.

"But maybe a little bland," I commentated, as I chewed on it and tasted the slight seasoning of salt.

If I were to phrase it nicer, I could taste the ingredients well, but it was a little lacking. Personally, I would have preferred more of a punch. For example, I thought the dish would taste incredible with the dipping sauces used for Genghis Khan grilled lamb.

"Here we go. Typical Dosanko, trying to use Genghis sauce on everything."

"How dare you?"

"You're the only one who would prefer such a pungent taste, Eiji. Look around. They're pretty happy with the dishes as-is."

I looked around to find the rest of the party enjoying the gagd dishes while each expressed their take on it. As my partner had just pointed out, no one seemed dissatisfied.

"Am I the crazy one?"

"You're the modernized one. Too acclimated to strong flavors," the small dragon cackled.

8.

As Tiamat and I were engaging in stupid chitchat, a bowl was placed before

us; it contained a soft green soup. Lady Millia puffed her chest.

“I tried making the Senzu beans into a soup!”

“...”

Uh-huh. Her enthusiasm for experimentation was admirable, and I thought an edamame potage was actually a good idea. It sounded like something a certain café owner from an Isekai novel I had gotten into would come up with. So, that was fine. With a gentle visual, I was sure that it would be popular with women, too. That wasn't the problem. The problem was its bizarre name.

“Um... Miss Millia? Did you say Senzu...?”

“Yes! It means the bean of a hermit. Dad said this is what we should call it!”

“Oh, I see... I was really hoping for the other possibility...”

If at all possible, I did not want this name to go around. What was this, an anime about half-monkey aliens? The beans were normal edamame...

“Hm. Not a bad marketing tactic. People would be more grateful for a hermit's bean than an ordinary one.”

There went Tiamat, without a shred of a sense of responsibility. This was more than false advertising. This was fraud. We just happened to know that edamame contained vitamin B1. We didn't add anything to it, much less a blessing or protection. It was worse than false-idol worship.

“You know, Tia...”

“You're overthinking it, Eiji. Faith is in the eye of the beholder. What's important is that we add some value to it.”

“Value...?”

“It doesn't put the dish in a good light to just say it used to be livestock feed. Were you not worried about that?”

“Yes, you're right, but...”

I was worried that people would be hesitant to try a dish from the preconception of it as livestock feed. That's why I tried the gagd dish first.

“Telling the whole truth is not always the best option. What marketing

campaign is complete without a little exaggeration?”

It's not like we'd be lying, she added. Without me, no one here would have started eating edamame. In that sense, it wasn't untrue that a Hermit had brought about the dish. It just wasn't the whole truth.

“It can't be helped, I guess...”

“You don't seem happy with it.”

“Yeah. But I understand.”

I shrugged, choosing to believe that it was a necessary course of action. It wasn't like I had a better idea for the name, either. Anyone in the workforce knows to present alternatives when disagreeing with an idea. Shooting down an idea for no reason other than disliking it is just a tantrum.

In the end, edamame was to be called Senzu, or Hermit Beans. It would be served as a bar snack, too. On the other hand, gagd meat would be served as full-on dishes.

“The beans are another story, but we can't sell the meat at too low of a price,” said Mister Milon.

It was only natural since it wasn't domesticated, and the supply of it solely depended on the yield of the hunts.

“It's never too easy, is it?” Tiamat said, with a satisfied sigh from a full belly.

“Down the road, we should properly domesticate them,” I responded as I rubbed my jaw.

The gesture didn't hold a particular significance. It was just sore. It seemed that the people in this world had tougher teeth and jaws than me. The gagd thigh, in particular, was tough as nails. Chewing on the hardened muscle made me feel animalistic. Its savory flavor aided in me overeating but my jaw was paying the price. It was once again clear that the people of Lishua, who could chow down thick steak after steak, were of a different breed than the modern-day human like me.

“What were you thinking of, specifically?” Mister Milon asked, as he wiped

the sweat from his forehead with his hand towel.

We were in a bath house. There were many of them in Lishua, and we had decided to enjoy a soak after our meal. Most of them, by the way, were coed. Therefore, Tiamat, Millia, and Maley, along with other women, were sharing the large bath with us. Apparently? The Hero? Who introduced the concept of baths? To this country? Told them that coed? Was normal? Uh-huh. As if we were in the Edo period.

If I recall correctly, in the movie *Shogun* (set in the Edo period) a Japanese woman and a Dutch man share a bath. In response to the man's surprise, the woman says:

"In this country, we believe that there is an invisible wall between men and women. That is why no one is ashamed when showing their skin in a bath."

Or something of the like. Don't quote me on it.

In any case, it didn't really matter. I was about 90% sure that the mighty hero in question wasn't from the Edo period, nor did he spread the culture of bathing according to his own experiences. He just wanted to take coed baths. Though not as a privilege just for himself, but with the reasoning to make it normal; or otherwise his excuse for convincing people that coed baths were nothing to be embarrassed about had just stuck around. I imagined it was something like that.

Just so everyone is aware, a woman washing up with seductive gestures in these scenarios is solely a product of male fantasy. It's only seductive in fiction and film. Why would anyone, when this was a normal day in their life, wash their body with the gaze of the opposite sex in mind?

"Sir Eiji?"

Mister Milon looked concerned as I was lost in thought watching the women wash their hair and bodies without a shred of sensuality.

"Oh, sorry, I'm fine. In terms of domesticating the gagd, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I'm not an expert in the matter, so I can't be too sure, but..."

With that disclaimer, I gave a quick rundown. Fortunately, we had gained the acquaintance of Baze, the lord of the forest. If he could provide us with a few gagdlets, we could multiply them to set up a steady supply. Since people here already raised livestock, I was sure that they already had a system for raising them.

That being said, gagds were magibeasts with large fangs, which would require caution. I couldn't imagine the turn of events if a gagd farmer were to end up injured or killed.

"Pigs have fangs, too," Tiamat, who smoothly swam through the bath to approach us, informed me.

"Really?"

"Pigs are domesticated boars. Why would they lose their fangs just from being domesticated?"

Come to think of it...

"Pigs have their canine teeth cut off on the day they are born," she continued. "Although, that's also to keep them from hurting the mother while nursing."

"They're literally defanged, then."

Which, figuratively, means to be made much less aggressive. Perhaps the phrase originated from practices like this. Humans were raising these beasts for their own benefit after all. It wouldn't do if they were left with elements of the wild. It may seem cruel, but it also seemed necessary.

"This isn't something we can fix in a matter of days, though."

"Mm-hm. There will be cracks in the foundation if we try to force it. Domestication of livestock on Earth has been going on for over ten thousand years. It isn't something we can alter with a flick of the wrist."

Indeed, that history was built on trial and error by generations going way back before the Common Era. It was too dangerous to turn all of that on its head with nothing but half-hearted tidbits of knowledge. The last thing we could afford was to make the same mistakes Mister Piece-of-Shit Hero had made.

"There's your answer, Milon. We lack the proper knowledge of raising

livestock, so we cannot provide you with any detailed process.”

“No need for concern, Master Tiamat. You have given us enough hints already.”

Mister Milon didn’t even seem disappointed. He hadn’t grown his business this large on dumb luck.

9.

First thing in the morning the next day, Syfer came to visit me. Forcibly dragging me out of bed, he put me into rags (as if I was a slave) before bringing me to the courtyard of Milon Manor. To boot, he sat me onto the ground and shoved my back down to make me grovel on the ground.

“So cruel... What have I done to deserve this...?”

A demon had been sent to bring hellish torment unto me.

“What do you mean, Sir Eiji? You could get hurt if you don’t stretch first.”

“Urgh...”

His overly charming smile was blinding. Where was all his energy coming from?

“You’re just a weakling, Eiji. Too sore to move? What a geezer.”

Tiamat added insult to injury. I had walked a lot the past two days! And I couldn’t sleep well with nothing between me and the ground.

What was the point of working out, anyway? I had finally returned to town, why couldn’t I have enjoyed a moment’s rest? My whole body was screaming in pain, tearing at the seams. This part wasn’t in the job application. Stop this madness, young man.

“The Bureaucrat in Captive, by Eiji Kazama.”

“I’m sorry, Sir Eiji. I don’t understand a thing you are saying.”

“Yep. It’s all nonsense, Syfer. Don’t mind me.”

I would have been dumbfounded if Syfer, a resident of another world,

understood my reference to a poem titled “Ostrich in Captive” by Kotaro Takamura, published in 1928. In any case, I was the one who asked him to train me. While I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had been very maliciously set up, I couldn’t back out of it now, even if streaks of tears flowed down my face... I wanted to just go home.

“Stretching is painful for you? A little too out of shape, don’t you think?” Tiamat laughed, slapping the ground with her sturdy tail.

She, by the way, was playing with Baze. Apparently it was a game where each tried to pin down the other. A four-meter Fenrir versus a barely 180cm (if I didn’t count her tail) dragon wouldn’t be much of a fight if the game was contingent on size, but it seemed that Baze was the one being toyed with. Tiamat didn’t even let him inside a range where he could make a palpable hit, let alone grapple.

Of course, if I were to jump into such a ring, I would have been a corpse in one second flat. So I kept a fair distance between myself and them. Now Tiamat was interrupting my conversation with Syfer all the while parrying Baze’s attacks. How many legs did she have up on the Fenrir?

“In any case, Sir Eiji. I think you’re a little too stiff,” Syfer said, as he pulled my left arm and stretched it behind my back, more like a chiropractic session than a stretch. It felt pretty good.

“I apologize. Never had a job that required me to be physically active.”

“No need to apologize, but you might actually get hurt if we jump right into things.” Syfer half-sighed, half-chuckled.

Don’t joke about it.

Shout out to all the dads who have gotten themselves hurt during the dads’ dance portion of their daughters’ recitals. One can’t underestimate just how out of shape people can get.

“Not underestimating. For today, we’re going to focus on stretching. Get you on your feet tomorrow.”

“I don’t mind if we just keep stretching forever.”

It felt good enough that, if Syfer were to become a masseur, I would go to him regularly.

“Then you’ll never get any training done.”

Yep. That was so true, I got teary-eyed.

“But you’re really good at this, Syfer. Where did you pick up these techniques?”

“Just did, after a while. Comes with knowing how to break the body.”

He casually dropped that scary notion. This was a man specialized in fighting, after all.

After finishing our morning training, we all came to the breakfast table. Mister Milon’s conditions seemed to be improving further. While I doubted that he had consumed enough vitamin B1 for a complete recovery, it seemed to be enough to get him out of the chronic state of malnutrition.

“It appears the Senzu are already working, Sir Eiji,” Mister Milon said, during breakfast.

Another meal filled to the brim with edamame dishes. The one that particularly caught my eye was a bowl of rice and beans. That was good. I couldn’t have enough of the white rice seasoned by the beans and their salt.

“How do you mean?”

Putting the rice down for a moment, I asked for clarification. He wasn’t talking about his improvement. That was already apparent two days ago.

“While you were away, Sir Eiji, I provided some Senzu to a few bars owned by some friends. We’ve already received an amount of reorders this morning.”

“I see.”

I chuckled. No wonder the edamame dishes seemed refined at the tasting of gagd dishes yesterday. Preparations were already underway even before we had returned. Striking the iron while it’s hot, Mister Milon knew when to seize a business opportunity.

“Not without concerns, however.”

“What is it? Are we running out of edamame?”

If that was the case, things were dire. A supply that could be depleted in a matter of days could never provide for the entire population of this country.

“Oh, no. No need for worry there. We already grow plenty of it for livestock feed to begin with. In fact, most farmers are even annoyed by the plant growing rapidly on its own.”

Never underestimate the vitality of beans. As we spoke, Mister Milon’s business was buying up those pesky little beans by the cartful. The growers were left richer than before, and Mister Milon had a promising return to look forward to. A win-win. Considering that this could lead to improving the health of the people of Lishua, throw another win in there.

“Then, what are the concerns?”

“We have some complaints, mostly from women. Nothing major.”

“Which are?”

“That most of the dishes are bar food.”

“Oh, I see...”

I could only muster a chuckle at that. The boiling recipe I’d demonstrated was exactly that. While the chefs had developed some more uses, putting them in soup or rice for example, I believed that the rightful place of an edamame is by a cold pint of beer. Gagd meat was more of a masculine food too. Perhaps they wouldn’t be too popular with the ladies.

“Come to think of it, Maley didn’t eat much of it either,” Syfer chimed in.

Maley was the sole female of his party. She didn’t seem like the type to drink heavily, so I couldn’t imagine her choking down beans and meat with a side of ale.

“Hmm. An edamame dish that women would like...”

Quite the conundrum, especially since I had no expertise in the kitchen.

“Tia? Have anything up your sleeve?”

“Don’t women and children prefer sweets?” said the biologically-female

dragon fighting Baze over gagd meat at breakfast. Seemed a little too simple to conclude that non-drinkers like sweetness.

“Hmm. Sweet, you say?”

Mister Milon was the one who seemed more interested. I looked around to find that Syfer’s and Millia’s interests were piqued too.

Then I remembered. In olden days, sweetness was a coveted taste. There were no sweets sold at the corner store, like modern day. Back in the day, people in Japan would chew on the roots of plants like jiaogulan in search of any semblance of sweetness.

Of course, I never lived through those times, but I assumed that the current times in this world were comparable to that. Perhaps a sweet edamame treat would explode in popularity.

“But a sweet edamame dish...?”

I dug deep into my memory bank, and everything I could recall was savory or spicy. In the first place, even if I knew the taste of some pre-packaged snack, I didn’t know how to make them.

“Remember? The traditional one in Japan.”

Tiamat grinned at me in my confusion. Was there really such a thing? I still couldn’t shake my perception of edamame as a salty food.

“Zunda mochi. Zuuundaaaa.”

“Why’d you say it like that?”

10.

Zunda mochi is a traditional dish of the Tohoku region of Japan. It’s usually enjoyed with ground edamame on top of the mochi. A historical drama on NHK a while back had even shown a scene where Masamune Date was serving them to the regional lords of feudal Japan. Apparently there was already a form of grocery store sampling back then. According to that particular drama, of course.

It’s worth noting that not all Zunda are sweet, and some of them can be

savory. Nowadays, the sweeter varieties have become mainstream. I recalled a Zunda shake being sold in a basement level of Sapporo station. It was pretty good.

“That comedian called something Deluxe raved about it, too. It’ll be a hit with women and children.”

“The person you’re thinking of is neither a woman nor a child. And not a comedian, but a columnist.”

I did make these corrections to Tiamat’s statement. Not that I knew the person in question personally, nor was I particularly a fan, but I wanted us to acknowledge his occupation correctly... for some reason.

“In any case, I’m picking up what you’re putting down. If we can get the ingredients, maybe we can manage Zunda.”

All I’d have to do is grind it down and place it on mochi!

“The ingredients we need are edamame and sugar, and a little salt for taste. As for the mochi, we can work with the rice they have now. It won’t be as stretchy as Japanese mochi, but it’ll have a similar texture.”

Tiamat gave details from one of her knowledge DLC packs. My guess was that this time it didn’t come from the useless knowledge pack.

“Sugar might be a problem, though... Mister Milon, what sorts of sweeteners are the people of this country accustomed to?” I asked.

The answer I received from Mister Milon was maple syrup, which in my world was created by boiling down the sap from sugar maple trees. Naturally, no such tree existed in this world. Some unintelligible words were used in Mister Milon’s response.

“Syrup, you say? I don’t think that will go too well with Zunda.”

“In the first place, it isn’t easy to acquire, financially speaking. We also have a honey, but that is even more expensive.”

“Right.”

If it was easy to acquire, there would have been no reason for Syfer and Millia to show such interest for the topic. There was no such thing as ‘too sweet.’

Those were the times they were living in. And yet, they had plenty of white rice. Of course they would overeat it. Rice does have a subtle sweetness to it.

I was faced with the answer to a question I never thought to ask myself. What would happen when you introduce refined white rice to people who had been munching on rye for generations? A terribly distorted world. In order to correct it, I was about to distort it even further.

“It’s not as tragic as you think it is. Even without your guidance, these people would have eventually found edamame and gagd meat. And the concept of vitamins.”

Reading my expression, Tiamat comforted me. She had a point. Just like the people on Earth, these people had the smarts to save themselves from extinction. Eventually, they would have found a cure for beriberi. It was only a question of when.

It wasn’t until the 1920s when vitamins were categorized and understood. Were there no treatments for scurvy or beriberi before then? Not necessarily. From trial and error, some effective methods were realized. For example, it was publicized in the mid-18th century that fruit helped treat scurvy. They just couldn’t prove how.

If I were to assume that Azur Kingdom was about as evolved as a country in medieval Europe, that could mean as far back as the 5th century on Earth. Considering that the cure for beriberi was found in the 20th century, it could take a maximum of 1400 years for the people of Azur to find it.

I noted before that beriberi killed over a million people over the course of 70 years. If I kept the math simple, beriberi in this world could kill over 20 million in the time it would take them to find the cure. It could have meant the end of the world for these people, quite literally.

I wanted to avoid that, so I used the knowledge I had. I chose to correct a world misshapen by a cheat code called Modern-Day Knowledge by typing in a console command of the same name.

“And you made the right choice, Eiji. Florence Nightingale used her connections to save people’s lives in Crimea. Was that an evil deed?” Tiamat

said, with a smile.

In the Crimean War, where the alliance of Britain, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Sardinia fought the Russian Empire, a nurse, Florence Nightingale, stormed into the field hospital and overruled the male-dominated army by using everything in her arsenal, including the influence of Queen Victoria, to reduce the mortality rate at the hospital from 42% to 2%. She saved lives using connections, wealth, media, and even violence. This depiction might be jarring from the Angel in White image most Japanese people hold of her; still, she was an angel.

An angel isn't someone who gives out pretty flowers, but someone who fights for those who are suffering.

...to borrow her own words.

“Let’s make sugar,” I declared, and turned to Tiamat. “Tia. Can we get any beets?”

“You’re a Dosanko, after all. That’s your first thought, instead of sugar canes?”

Oh, can it. The northern wilderness that I called my home produces more sugar beets than any other province in Japan. Sugar beets, by the way, produce more than 70% of Japan’s sugar. Sugar cane? What’s that? You think I had any of those in Hokkaido?

“Long story short, they have beets. Albeit an unaltered species.”

Apparently, its sugar content was much lower than the modern-day variety.

“About 1%, to be specific. The modern-day species are about 20% sugar, so that’s not even close,” Tiamat explained.

“1%... Yeah, I wouldn’t call that close...”

“The world today was sharpened by the tireless efforts of those who’ve come before you. This is just one of the many examples of that.”

Of course. While we accept all of our modern-day technologies and conveniences without question, not a single one of them was possible without someone somewhere having an idea. These things are built off of someone

dreaming of a future and dedicating themselves to making it a reality, through numerous trials and errors. Our lives are built upon the unfathomable efforts of countless people. And our efforts are carried onto future generations. That's how human history has been woven together.

Now I could understand why the inspector of the Interstellar League of Nations (who didn't call herself a goddess) had such a disdain for inter-world travel. It was blasphemous. Those who know the end result guiding a civilization to it. It may sound good on paper. It might even feel virtuous to those performing the deed. But it's not.

People of worlds outside our own have the right to make mistakes. To make the wrong choice. To end up in a helpless situation. To correct those mistakes. To learn from their wrong choice. And to find a ray of hope at the brink of hopelessness. Not even a god should be allowed to take that away.

But that's what that piece-of-shit Hero did. Were they the ones that selectively bred the white rice to make it the species they introduced to this world? Were they the ones that discovered how to refine the rice? Weren't they the ones that simply showboated some tidbits of information they got from textbooks and the internet? Taking credit for those before you wasn't enough? You had to go and ruin this world, too?

Dear Mister Piece-of-Shit Hero, I'll fix the world you broke... using the same knowledge you had from modern-day Japan.

The Gears Begin to Turn

1.

“Help me, Tia-emon!”

“Hm. Are you really the guy that made that serious declaration a moment ago?”

“Sorry.”

No matter how grandiose a promise I made, there wasn't much I could actually do. Even if we were to obtain some sugar beets (the unaltered species), I had no idea where to find them.

“Sugar beets were originally from the Mediterranean. They mostly grow in tepid climates, but they'll also grow fine in subarctic climates, and they will grow sweeter the more the temperature changes throughout the day.”

I knew a place like that.

“Like Hokkaido.”

“Yep. Kitami, for example, is particularly well suited for growing them.”

“I remember there was a pretty large-scale beet farm there.”

“Hm. And as for the rice we have been eating these past few days... any guess on the cultivar?”

That was a tough riddle to crack. I wasn't enough a foodie to pinpoint the cultivar of a bowl of rice just from eating it.

“Urgh...”

“You eat it all the time. You don't even recognize the rice from your own home?”

“Whuh?”

“It's Kirara. Kirara 397.”

“It’s Hokkaido rice!?”

“Yep. The climate here is very similar to that of the Donan region. One couldn’t ask for better conditions to grow Hokkaido rice.”

Donan, a southwestern region of Hokkaido, has long, dry days in summer and wet winters. The opposite of mainland Japan, particularly Tokyo and the rest of the Kanto region.

“This hero must have known to choose Hokkaido rice based on the climate.”

“If he had thought it through that much, I wish he would have considered the long-term ramifications...”

Or just bring over a rice from Kyushu or somewhere and fail miserably at growing it here. Why did he have to think of Dosanko rice? Resilient to cold and still yields a ridiculous amount, Kirara is one of the best tasting cultivars to boot. Why did he have to make the perfect choice in this particular department?

“In any case, there should be some beets nearby.”

If the climate here was similar to Hokkaido, it could easily be growing in the wild.

“Hm. Milon, where can we find some rygel?” Tiamat asked.

That was what they called sugar beets in this world.

“Rygel...?” Mister Milon contemplated. He had *What do these Hermits want with that?* written all over his face. It was only natural. I assumed that they considered rygel a weed.

“Mister Milon. I will teach you how to make a sweetener... of the Hermits.”

“Will you, truly...!?” Mister Milon’s eyes widened.

“But, please keep in mind. The knowledge I bestow upon you will change the world... just like the knowledge of rice did.”

“Yes. I am well aware.”

The white rice brought over by the hero caused the beriberi epidemic. What turmoil could we expect from importing sugar into this world? To be honest, I didn’t really know. It could very well be a door with another form of imminent

doom on the other side.

“So, if you feel like you shouldn’t hear it, I won’t tell you.”

“Sir Eiji. That would be cruel after telling us this much.”

Milon laughed, and Syfer and Millia nodded in agreement. If anyone here wasn’t ready to jump at the prospect of obtaining a sweetener other than maple syrup and honey, they weren’t a businessperson, to say the least. Well, Syfer was an adventurer.

“All right. Then we will go harvest some rygel.”

Rygel was growing in a hilly area about four days north of Lishua. Of course, that was four days by foot for a resident of this world. It would take me a week or so. I was more concerned with whether or not I could continue walking for a straight week.

No. No I could not.

“Hm. Nothing to be proud of there,” Tiamat remarked.

And so, we decided to arrange for carriages. Four carriages, in fact, each drawn by a pair of horses. It shaped up to be a little caravan.

Unbelievably, I was appointed leader of the pack. Tiamat and Baze would accompany me as advisors, Syfer’s team would guard the caravan, and one of Mister Milon’s assistants, Rigarte, would tag along as a representative of his business. In addition, sixteen workers joined the fray to dig up the sugar beets. Funds and supplies were provided by Mister Milon, and the hiring of members was done by the Adventurers’ Guild.

This was a major project. Mister Milon was concerned that, despite all of them being A-rank, a team of merely four adventurers would not be enough. I disagreed. It wasn’t like we were transporting precious goods. We were just going to dig up some beets. Besides, we had a dragon and a Fenrir with us. Even if bandits were to attack us, they’d be killed in the blink of an eye.

Also, since we would have to make camp a few times along the way, I acquired some new equipment. The suit and dress shoes I was wearing on my way to my date wouldn’t cut it for an adventure. The early summer still brought

about cold nights, so I dressed in warm clothes, as well as in knee-high boots and a cape. In addition, I hung a shortsword on my waist for my protection. Not that it would be of use to me any time soon!

“I think a longsword would suit you better, Sir Eiji, since you’re so tall,” remarked Syfer, who had accompanied me in acquiring my new equipment.

He was attentive, kind, and genuine, not to mention good-looking. If I were a woman I might have fallen for him.

“No thanks. That’d be heavy.”

“You’re supposed to slam it down, using its weight. There’d be no point to a light longsword.”

Yeah, right. What did he expect from me, when even a set of leather armor was too heavy for me to wear.

“Hm. Absolutely nothing to be proud of.”

“You’re starting to sound like a broken record, Tia.”

“I don’t enjoy repeating myself, either. People may doubt my reserve to remain the straight man.”

Straight man? Are you kidding me? You’re definitely the comedic relief.

I felt like that was unanimous, anyway.

And so, the day of our departure had arrived. Mister Garish and Mister Milon had come all the way to the city gate to see us off. Along with their wives, and Miss Millia, of course. Somehow, it seemed like I was the hero departing on a quest to vanquish the Demon Lord! We were just going to do some farm work though!

“Let us depart.”

I instructed the coachman, sitting down next to him. He nodded and picked up the reigns. The wheels began to turn, clanking and clonking. My first adventure in this world. Curtains were rising.

That being said, there was not a single noteworthy event that took place on our trip. No monsters attacked, and there were no bandits. Not even a chance

to save a beautiful woman stranded on the side of the street. It was as peaceful as it could have been, and it wouldn't be amiss to call it boring, either. The real trouble began after we arrived at our destination.

I had vaguely expected to come to a beet farm, which, as with a little bit of thought I should have foreseen, was not the case. Our destination was nothing more than a vaguely hilly field. We were forced to look for rygel amidst the overgrown grass.

At first, work was tedious. We had no equipment, but only our hands to dig them up with. To top it off, the workers didn't know what a rygel root looked like. They were figuratively searching in the dark for these things after Tiamat had shown the one she had plucked out of the ground.

It's worth noting that I wasn't the first one of our group to tap out, rather Baze was. He had grown bored of it. He was grumbling something about why he, the king of the forest, had to dig up some potatoes. Well, these were beets, though. In any case, his sabotage stunted our progress quite a bit, since Fenrir claws could dig up a lot more dirt than a shovel could.

Then Tiamat came up with a scheme. She had Baze eat one of the rygel roots we had acquired. Even though its sugar content was only at 1% or so, the sweetness was there. After realizing that these would be collected to make something sweet, Baze returned to work, way more enthusiastic than before.

...Apparently, Fenrir were omnivores.

2.

"Have you noticed, Baze?"

"Of course."

Tiamat and Baze were conversing. This was our second day out in the field. With some tips and tricks under their belt the workers were much more efficient, steadily increasing our yield. Our goal, for the time being, was 1000kg, or a metric ton. While that wouldn't be enough to completely fill four carriages, we weren't going to ditch our water and food for the trip home to make room for more.

At this rate, I guessed that we would reach our goal in the next day or two. The morale of the workers was high with plenty of pay, food, and rest. Mister Garish would never recommend anyone that wouldn't be dedicated to the work with these conditions, and Mister Milon would have never paid for their services.

Because the workers were hard at work, the rest of us were left with less work to do. Tiamat's anatomy wasn't well-suited for farmwork, and I would have only gotten in the way. While Baze was good at digging up dirt and had plenty of physical endurance to keep at it, he was casually sent down to the minors since his work was too... rough around the edges. What a useless trio of a human, dragon, and Fenrir we were.

It didn't seem right to just stand around doing no work, so we were keeping watch for the time being. Not that we were at risk of being attacked, but we couldn't leave the site completely unguarded. There was the added bonus of the workers' piece of mind in knowing that they were protected. While on our watch, Tiamat and Baze held that exchange quietly.

"Of course, what? Mister Baze?"

Naturally, I hadn't noticed anything. I wondered how I could acquire the special skill of picking up on the presence of something.

"Someone has been watching us since yesterday." he informed us nonchalantly. I couldn't help but turn to and fro in search of said figure, but all I could see was waves of green as far as the eye could see.

There were many short trees around, which provided countless spots for someone to hide, and the grass wasn't short either. If someone could conceal their presence, I imagined it would be difficult to notice that character until they were extremely close to us. Tiamat, Baze, and Syfer's team were another story, but the workers were in a very precarious situation.

"We should warn everybody that—"

"No need. I don't sense any animosity. The eyes pointing our way are filled with curiosity," Tiamat interrupted me.

"I see..."

What's a dragon and a Fenrir doing with some humans? might have been what they were thinking. That was easy to understand. From a bystander's perspective, we were clearly a weird group of characters. We were the kind of gathering that one would be extremely intrigued about, but not really want to approach. Uh-huh. And tragically, I was the leader of the bizarre bunch. Were there any volunteers to take my place?

"But it's kind of embarrassing to have them just stare at us. Let's let 'em join the club, while we're at it."

"Why did you say the last part in the Hokkaido dialect, Tia?"

"The word I just used originated in Tohoku, around Tsugaru. The Hokkaido dialect is a melting pot of dialects from all over."

"We didn't really need that tidbit, though, did we?"

"Just a little wit for you. So, why don't you join us? Let us share a meal."

Tiamat called out towards a direction with no creature in sight. Eventually, a face peeked out from the tall grass.

"Woah!"

I was surprised. It was a cat. Well, a little more wild-looking than that. From my quick estimation, it was about two meters long, and it had large ears with a body full of grey fur. Imagine a giant Russian Blue.

"Hm. A Cait Sith. A rare creature to sight in a field," Baze explained.

While they were magibeasts, Cait Sithes rarely attacked humans, and mostly lived each day as they pleased. They had a curious and trickster nature. Though they were both intelligent and physically gifted, they were not very aggressive.

"Uh-huh."

As I took in the characteristics of Cait Sithes being explained to me, the one I was looking at disappeared. In an instant it was right in front of Tiamat, making an incredible jump. We were at least twenty meters away.

"An incomparable honor to receive your invitation, Dragon Princess," it said with a smoky baritone, and bowed its head. What an elegant cat.

“And it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance too, King of the Forest, Human.”

Its long tail swung to and fro, elegantly. Baze had a sense of royal presence, and while Tiamat appeared coquettish, she had a sense of authority, somehow. In contrast, this Cait Sith had the aura of a nobleman.

“I am a little fool by the name of Hieronymus. The pleasure is all mine,” he introduced himself. No wonder he was elegant. He shared a name with the famous Baron Munchausen, after all.

And so, my team grew to four, just like Syfer’s. With the same male to female ratio, too, at three to one. The definitive difference was that I was the only human on my team... not that I was bothered by that or anything, dammit.

“Hold on, Sir Eiji. There’s no comparison when it comes to combat strength. I don’t even know if the four of us could take on Hieronymus together.” Syfer offered as consolation.

As a guideline for combat strength, apparently about ten Hieronymuses would be a good match against Baze, and about ten Bazes would be a good match against Tiamat. Leading these creatures alone put me in great light... or so he said. I wasn’t too sure. It seemed more like the fifth installment of the most famous JRPG in the world. Well, come to think of it, the protagonist from that title was pretty strong. And the same definitely could not have been said about me. Which meant...

“I’m the flower child?”

“Your name is Eiji. I don’t think I’ll be going to your town one day.”

Tiamat, the magic girl, tied up my insane rambling. Thanks for that.

“You shouldn’t be old enough to know that one, though,” she added.

“All hail the internet.”

In any case, my party ended up being mostly comprised of non-human creatures. As Syfer pointed out, we collectively boasted incredible strength in combat; that was sure to cause its own set of problems. I was just an ordinary human, after all. Albeit with the bizarre status of a Hermit.

A Hermit, dragon, Fenrir, and Cait Sith. Drawing attention to ourselves was becoming unavoidable. Since we were on a quest to save lives, I could foresee the potential of us being worshiped or idolized.

“There you go overthinking again. Who would look at you and think you were sent by a god?” Tiamat cackled. Thanks for the honesty.

I had to wholeheartedly agree, though. If one were to peg a puny bureaucrat like me as a god, they should head straight for either the optometrist or psychiatrist.

“But that wasn’t what I was getting at.”

Things were fine, now. While I stayed at Lishua, and displayed my shortcomings for the world to see, there wasn’t a problem. One could arise after I leave. The rice the hero introduced to this world started an epidemic, which was to be quelled by the Hermit Beans and gagd meat I introduced, and their quality of life would improve with beet sugar.

In the end, what would the people of this land have done? With the right answer given to them from the start, they would only reap the benefits. Was I not about to rob these people of their brain power, imagination, and willingness to take on a challenge? If they were to grow accustomed to some hero or Hermit saving the day every time they were in a dangerous situation, they would all be doomed.

“That’s what I mean when I say you’re overthinking.”

Exasperated, Tiamat bit down my head. Chomp.

“W-W-W-W-What are you doing!?”

It was more of a nibble, and didn’t really hurt. Just stupidly scary.

“I thought if I bit off a piece of your head, it might take away some of that bad brain of yours that keeps complicating things on its own.”

“Please don’t. I’ll die.”

Humans, as far as I knew, would die if a piece of their head was bitten off. We were thinking reeds, after all.

3.

“There’s no sense in worrying about the future. You’re not a superhero.”

I couldn’t save everyone, anyway. The best I could hope for was doing something about the situation at hand. Even in that case, I would end up far from perfect. I could save some lives, but others would be left to their demise for my lack of ability.

Some triage would be required of me, like a rescue team during a natural disaster. They couldn’t spend all of their time trying to save someone who couldn’t be saved, but had to turn to those they could save. That doesn’t make them heartless, because they’re not gambling out there. They have to make sure to save those with the highest chances of survival.

“That’s how things are. I don’t expect you to get over it, though.”

“Tia...”

“Do what you can. Neither the Inspector nor the god of this world would expect you to perform something you can’t.”

“Tia...”

“If it still feels too heavy on your shoulders, just let me know, and I’ll bite your head to pieces with a swift chomp. Then your job here is done.”

She put some force into her bite.

“Ow! Ow! Your fangs are digging into me! Your fangs!”

Nothing about that was a swift chomp. She would totally torture me to death with those fangs, like for real.

“Thank you, Tia.”

“Hm. I am your partner, after all.”

The dragon finally released her bite on my head.

Now that we had Hieronymus on board, our efficiency was higher than ever. Cait Sithes were a species very well versed in magic, and he had various magic spells under his belt, too. One of those spells, Lock-On, was extremely useful in our situation. Countless rays of light shot out of Hieronymus, illuminating where

the beets were. The workers now only had to run over to those spots and dig up the plant. We no longer had to spend any time looking for the plant.

“I’m sure it’s a variation on targeting, but I wonder if there’s a point when he’s multi-locking so many targets at once?” said Miss Maley, the only other spellcaster in our party.

“There’s no point in debating whether or not there is one, fräulein.”

The magical cat elegantly waved his tail.

“I thought it necessary, and magic answered the call. Voila.”

“So you made this spell up on the spot?”

“Is magic something that can be made? Is it not something that should be sung to the rhythm of one’s heart? What is there, has always been, wise fräulein.”

I had a hard time deciding whether or not I understood what he was saying. Of course, I had no knowledge of magic, so I had no way of telling if what he said was accurate. However, Miss Maley looked amazed, and Tiamat was nodding to it, so I decided that he must have hit the mark.

Or else, just like Hieronymus Karl Friedrich von Münchhausen, he just dodged the question with his eloquence and likable attitude. The man that shared a name with the Cait Sith was famous for telling tall tales, after all.

“No, he is mostly correct. The wind, the tide, and the phases of the moon, for example, all have a purpose, but you could say they don’t have one at all. The same goes for my magic,” Tiamat explained.

Um, sorry?

I was more confused than before.

“Tia. Can you dumb it down some more?”

“No, I cannot. And since you have no talent for magic, there would be no point in explaining it.”

“How cruel! Maybe if I work hard enough, I could use magic, too.”

“It’s not just you, Eiji. Anyone from modern-day Earth won’t be able to use

magic.”

The dragon sighed. Magic, superpowers, abilities... no matter what the name, it seemed that one needed a predisposition or a particular anatomy in order to wield it.

“Humans have little magic in them, and aren’t good at using it, anyway.”

Even in this world, there weren’t too many human spellcasters. It wasn’t something anyone could pick up and do. In addition, people on Earth have long forsaken the occult. Countries used to be governed by seeking the guidance of gods, and by horoscopes and prophecies. Those are the olden days.

Earth today is ruled by science and hard evidence. Nothing is acknowledged as law until the experiment proves the hypothesis under the same conditions regardless of who performs the experiment, and when, where, and how many times the experiment is performed. Even if a clairvoyant individual were to give the name of a wanted serial killer, no arrests or charges can be made without evidence.

“Do you consider that foolish?”

“I don’t. Much better than the alternative.”

Arresting someone based on the intuition of a detective, for example, would be ludicrous. Imagine the countless false convictions on our hands. Who could guarantee that said detective wasn’t acting on the basis of personal gain, anyway?

“Hm. A healthy way of thinking. That’s exactly why you’re not suited to perform magic.”

“I don’t really understand.”

“Magic is distortion. When the distortion is explained, there is no more mystique. That’s how magic faded away from Earth.”

While her explanation was rather shapeless, I decided that all I needed to know was that people from Earth, including myself, could not wield magic.

“But didn’t the hero and his party use magic?”

“They were a cheat code.”

“Touché.”

I shrugged. Using something or having something you ordinarily can’t is the definition of cheating.

As we continued our rather fruitless discourse, the beets were being rapidly harvested. With the pace we were at now, we would reach our goal earlier than expected, thanks to the mighty baron.

“It’s an honor to serve you, Lord Eiji.”

Picking up on my glance, the Cait Sith called back with the elegant wave of his tail. Lord? That kind of tickled. I had been using ‘sir’ and other honorifics of the like, but the word ‘lord’ carried a whole other meaning than reading it in books when I was the one being addressed by it.

“Oh, please. I should be thanking you, Lord Hieronymus.”

I tried using it in return, and it was super embarrassing. There was something painful about talking in a showboaty way once you hit thirty.

“A blushing middle-aged man calling out to his lord. There’s some indication for fiction of the fan variety.”

“And who exactly would be the target audience for that?”

A giant Russian blue and a man in his thirties...? I definitely would not ship that. I hadn’t realized that this sort of knowledge was implemented in Tiamat, too. How useless could her knowledge get? Eh, Miss Inspector?

“At this rate, our work should be done by the end of the day. Are we going back to town as soon as we’re done?” Tiamat asked me as she assessed our progress.

Our time of departure was actually a rather important matter. Enough that we should not have been engaging in discussion of fanfiction.

From the harvest point to the city of Lishua, it would take us about four days by carriage, which meant that we would have to make camp a minimum of three times along the way. Since we have a base camp set up now, everyone can take adequate rest, but on the road both our meals and rest would be more lacking than they are now, and we would have to spend manpower guarding

the camp. This was because, unlike on our way here, we had cargo.

While we were the only ones who should have been privy to the value of sugar beets at the moment, who knew how that information could have leaked? It wasn't too hard for me to imagine that someone might suspect that we were transporting some valuable goods under the guise of transporting the vegetable, especially when the job involved Mister Milon, the major merchant, and Mister Garish, the chief of the local Adventurers' Guild, along with A-rank adventurer guards. If anyone was out there watching us and just thought we were here to dig up some vegetables, perhaps they were a little naïve.

"Let's leave first thing in the morning. I'll discard all of our food tonight, save for five days' worth," I declared.

4.

Keeping five days' worth of food despite the return trip taking four days was basically an insurance plan.

"That's one cheap insurance. A day's worth of extra won't do any good if something were to happen."

"Peace of mind can make a difference."

I chuckled at Tiamat's logical counterpoint. On the topic of how much backup stock to keep, nothing was truly enough, actually. These were things not intended to be used to begin with, as long as things went according to plan. Keeping ten days' worth of food for a four days' trip was pointless.

"If something were to happen," Tiamat had said, but the job of the brain is to draw up the plan so no accidents would happen. Preparing for the unexpected isn't in the job description. If a party has to prepare for an unexpected event from the get-go, there was something wrong with the plan. 'Never tell me the odds' is, unfortunately, not a plan but more of a declaration of determination or a rationalization of impulse. A plan's no use at all if it's made with room for error.

"I can't really tell if you're careful or daring, Sir Eiji." Syfer laughed as he approached us.

“Indeed. In other words, he draws his lines in strange ways,” the dragon chimed in.

“You think so? I’m just saying there’s no point in considering a back-up for the back-up for the back-up.”

“Still, you kept five days’ worth of food.”

“I told you. I’m buying my peace of mind.”

With exactly enough, we would have always been plagued by the anxiety of ‘what if there isn’t enough?’ As the amount decreased, our insecurity would have magnified. With insurance that we can be up to a day late in our journey, said anxiety would be drastically lower.

“But we’re out of luck if we’re two days late, right?”

“True, Syfer. But a plan with a chance of a two day, so 48 hours, delay is flawed to begin with.”

“I see...”

Despite nodding along, my theory didn’t seem to click with him. That couldn’t be helped. Alas, it was the unbridgeable gap between management and talent.

“In any case, Lord Eiji, we shall feast tonight.”

Hieronimus approached us too. With Miss Maley at his side. Since when were they so chummy? Not fair.

“Is anything the matter?” he added.

“Nothing. Not jealous or anything, no sir.”

“What is this? Surely these can’t be the words of a gentleman accompanied by the exquisite Dragon Princess.”

The Cait Sith laughed, taking my remark to be in jest. I mean, of course it was, but...

“You’re being showered with compliments, Tia.”

“Hm. With my sublime beauty, it can’t be helped.”

Was that so? I couldn’t get with that standard of beauty. Tiamat? She was just

a greenish Zeke with wings.

“Just so you know, that one is quite the beauty too. Whether you can see it or not.”

I really couldn't see it. I had seen a version of Zeke as a little girl though, which was super adorable!

“Humans do have trouble seeing the beauty of the opposite sex in any species other than their own.”

“And you guys don't, Tia?”

“We do, generally speaking. But some species are sexually attracted to humans, too.”

Orcs, one of the staples of fantasy, for example. Half-demon half-humans, as well as half-human half-elves are common within the fantasy here. The protagonist of *Dragonlance*, one of the pioneers of epic fantasy and the predecessor to many Isekai fantasies, was also a half-elf, I thought.

“Although Tanis was born of an elven queen violated by a human man.”

“You're familiar with the material, Tia!?”

The series' first publication was back in 1984. I doubt that fantasy readers of today are familiar with it. Even I was only a year old or so when it came out. However... If we lose sight of the classics, or laugh it off as outdated, what are we to carry on into future generations? The shoulders we stand on aren't as insignificant as that.

“I've read the whole series. I've shed tears for Sturm's death, too.”

“Woah...”

How should I put this? I felt like I could share a good drink with her.

“Shall we discuss it through the night, Eiji?”

“Of course, Tia.”

“No. We're leaving early tomorrow. Please get some sleep.”

At Syfer's exasperated interjection, Tiamat and I shrank apologetically.

“We’re leaving,” I called out from my seat beside the coachman of the leading carriage.

Rays of morning light were beaming down on us. All four carriages were filled to the brim with beet roots; they weighed about a literal ton in total. If the sugar content of rygel was 1%, we should yield about ten kilograms of sugar from this haul.

With a confident neigh, the horses began their march.

“It does look like there is a little more sugar in these, thanks to the good soil and climate.”

“There is? ...You can tell?” I asked Tiamat, who sat beside me.

“I ate a few of them whole. It tasted too sweet to only contain 1% of sugar.”

Ate them whole...? Come to think of it, Baze did the same while in the field. What wild spirits they were.

“Tasted like 4 or 5, maybe even 6% if we’re lucky.”

“That’s super accurate, isn’t it!?”

Wow. Did she have a Brix meter for a tongue?

“All the foodies would be impressed.”

“Yep. I’d give you a standing ovation if I could.”

“That being said, I can’t be too concrete with the numbers. It’s only a guess.”

“That’s still impressive.”

My tongue, on the other hand, couldn’t tell the difference between beer and a low-malt beverage. And I wasn’t struck with awe or anything when I drank from a bottle of Kubota, a super fancy sake. I just felt like I was drinking water. Apologies to the sake connoisseurs of the world.

“Even if it’s 4%, that’s amazing.”

“Mm-hm. Ten kilos turns into eighty kilos. This calls for some forethought, Eiji.”

“Yep.”

I nodded, picking up on my partner's shift in tone. If that much sugar could be produced from the rygel it had the potential for profitable business. We couldn't expect Mister Milon to be the sole keeper of the sugar's ingredients and manufacturing technique. We go about this the wrong way, there will be blood.

Only the inhabitants of modern nations have the privilege of underestimating the value of sugar. Even on Earth, and even on the streets of America, there are boys who commit murder for a couple of bucks.

...And sugar was worth way more than a couple of bucks.

"...I think we need to visit the king."

"A government cap?"

"Exactly."

A type of economic control. Even in Japan there are a few examples of this amidst its free-market economy. Tuition for kindergarten, for example. Since the government has set a minimum and maximum price for it, institutions are forced to set their prices within that range. Of course, the goal of these restrictions is to prevent anyone from gaining an outrageous profit. This could be something that becomes necessary for the bartering of sugar in this world.

"We can't rest easy just yet. The king of this nation is a descendant of the hero who imported white rice into this world."

"Yep. Dark clouds ahead."

"Of course, it all depends on the successful refinement of sugar."

"Oh, right. We can screw up there."

We shared a chuckle. Discussing the ramifications of sugar upon this world at this point was, even with the most generous interpretation, counting our chickens before they hatched.

5.

We were never attacked on route, but we were (apparently) being watched

the entire time. Of course, I had no ability to detect that. Tiamat and Baze took notice, and they along with Hieronymus kept watch round the clock, so whoever was following us couldn't find a good time to strike.

The coupling for the night watch, by the way, was Tiamat and Syfer, Baze and Gorun, the archer, then Hieronymus and Maley. I couldn't help but think that the Cait Sith kept getting the longer end of the stick. She was one of the few women I'd seen that looked her age. Besides, her and Miss Millia were just about the only single women I knew in this world.

Unfortunately, as Miss Maley was sixteen and Miss Millia fifteen, neither of them were within my target range. As an adult with morals, I wasn't being attracted to highschool-aged girls. I would only ever go for women around my age, give or take five years. The only thing was, in this world, women of that age range were clearly grandmas, visually speaking. It was a dark world.

By the way, Yuri the ranger did not participate in the night watch as he had to prep and take down the camp, in addition to performing other miscellaneous tasks. Oh, and I didn't either... because there would have been no point to it! I slept in the dog pile comprised of the field workers and Mister Milon's assistants. I'm sorry, I was useless.

In any case, upon our safe return to Lishua, we received a thunderous welcome by Mister Milon and Mister Garish. They knew when we were returning thanks to Yuri running back to the city ahead of us. He served as our scout.

"Welcome back, Sir Eiji. We have everything ready on our end," said Mister Milon.

Come again? I don't get a break, or anything? We're about to dive right into sugar making.

"We're back. You've prepared things?"

"Of course."

What was he going to do if I didn't return with rygel? I had a feeling that there would be blood if I wasn't able to refine any sugar. Terrifying.

"Don't expect too much. We can't fully recreate our refining techniques

here.”

This was true. They didn’t have a filtration device, a centrifuge, or even a refrigerator. That tied our hands, forcing us to do this with a primitive method. Since my knowledge on the topic was very fuzzy, Tiamat’s assistance was a must.

That being said, the method itself was not difficult. First, we would wash the roots of the sugar beets before peeling them, dicing them, and soaking them in hot, but not boiling, water. The hot water would extract the sugar from the beets. We needed a lot of water, and firewood to heat it up.

I had checked these matters with Mister Milon before leaving for the harvest trip. The city of Lishua had plenty of water, and he said that we wouldn’t be short on firewood. I mean, I never doubted the abundance of water in the city after seeing so many public baths. Since the dawn of time, water has been critical to a civilization’s growth. That’s why cities were built close to large rivers.

In addition, the common diet of rice in Lishua was an indication of how much firewood they spent. The forest appearing in the middle of a field seemed to epitomize the aftermath of this to me. The end result of humans chopping down tree after tree. Encroaching upon nature. Since they had no concept of planting and farming trees, this was sure to become a major issue in the civilization’s future. In other words, the distortion caused by the hero’s imported culture reached far beyond the outbreak of beriberi. In fact, there were sure to be countless examples.

At the moment, I didn’t have the ability to start tackling deforestation, too. First, I had to save the people of Azur from beriberi. That was my top priority. As pathetic as it sounds, my plate was full from that. I was about to make sugar to make the people eat edamame to give them enough vitamin B1. What a roundabout method. Half of my problems would not have arisen if they were at least eating brown rice.

Let’s get back on track. After an hour or two, the sugar would start melting out of the beets into the hot water. At that point, we would take out the beets from the water and simmer down what was left. Once it was reduced and

thickened, we would pour it into a container and let the rest of the moisture evaporate on its own. When that's completely dried, we would have beet sugar, which was nothing like the powder white sugar we know.

Beet sugar is brown, and has a little bitterness to it. Still, it was one of the few sources of sweetness in this world, and could be used to cook. This would drastically increase the variety in available recipes. Now this world would have two of the five principal ingredients of cooking in Japan: sugar, salt, vinegar, soy sauce, and miso. As for the other three: my apologies. I don't know how to make them.

While I could ask Tiamat for the technique, and they already had soybeans, I guessed that making soy sauce and miso would still take an incredible amount of work and time. At this moment I didn't have that kind of time. We were in early summer. In the hottest time of the year, the number of beriberi patients would explode, because they sweat. Before that happened I wanted to have gagd meat and edamame popularized as much as possible among the residents.

"I introduced the doctors in town to Senzu. They were overjoyed to find that the patients they prescribed the beans to have begun to improve."

Mister Milon spoke to me as I was lost in random thought, watching the sugar refinement process. I returned a vague smile. The patients would need to eat too much edamame each day to call it a prescription for the disease. I don't think anyone could eat 600 grams of edamame each day.

"They seem to be experimenting with it, like grinding it into a tea."

"Ooh. That's..."

That's it. That was the desperate struggle of humanity. I nodded wholeheartedly. The people of this world were working to save themselves.

"I hope they succeed."

"So do I."

Mister Milon seemed genuine, too. As promised, he seemed to be working on the edamame front without too much concern for profit. Of course, that doesn't mean he would hurt his bottom line. He had done the math to make sure that, even after selling the goods for next to nothing, he would end up in

the black. We were about to distribute an incredible amount of it, on top of the added bonus of the Senzu brand. To boot, if a sweet Senzu dish were to come out, he would end up with a more than healthy profit.

Saving people, being recognized for it, and getting rich off of it. What a beautiful stroke of accounting genius. This was how Mister Milon had built up the business he had. I would never expect a businessman to work for charity, either.

“I can smell the sweetness in the air.”

Mister Milon formed a smile. As we engaged in chit-chat, it seemed that the sugar-making was coming down to the homestretch.

“Hm. It looks like we got more than expected.”

Tiamat nodded, looking at the test batch of beet sugar. We had used about ten kilograms of beets to yield about 500 grams of beet sugar. That wasn't half bad.

The remains of the now-sugarless beets, by the way, were to become livestock feed. While it wasn't something any human would enjoy consuming, the faintest leftover sugar made the livestock chomp it down with glee.

“Then, let's give it a taste, shall we?”

Lightly tapping on the congealed brown beet sugar, I made them into bite-size pieces. It wasn't sandy like white sugar, but more clumpy. Most likely because it still contained some moisture. This couldn't be helped, as we didn't have a method to mechanically dry it.

I tried popping a piece into my mouth. With some thickness to it, the sugar contained a particular hint of flavor. A gentle, natural flavor. Still...

“It's not that sweet... Did we screw up...?”

It had no overwhelming sweetness like the kind you taste when taking a spoonful of sugar. In comparison, the beet sugar was maybe a little sweeter than half as much as that.

“...Are you kidding, Sir Eiji?” Syfer, standing beside me, asked, as if he was holding something back.

“It’s good. Really good. This’ll treat that disease, right?”

“Yep. More precisely, a bean dish using this sugar will.”

“I see... I wish mom could have tasted this...”

A streak of tears fell down the swordsman’s face.

6.

Syfer’s mother had already passed away. She was a hard worker who loved her family, smiled often, and ate a lot. Her favorite food was, as expected, white rice. She too fell victim to beriberi, with all the boxes checked off. After her death, Syfer became an adventurer to support his family financially.

It had been two years since then. I had no way of bringing someone back to life.

“Syfer...”

That was beyond my abilities. What a powerless man I was. Alternatively, if I had been transported to this world a few years back, could I have prevented this tragedy?

“But you’re going to avenge her, Sir Eiji. With Senzu and gagd meat.”

There were no more tears in Syfer’s eyes as he said this and smiled at me. The seasons of his heart were turning. *He’s strong*, I thought.

In just two years, a seventeen-year-old boy was beginning to overcome the death of his parents and walk towards the future. The impression of sorrow I felt in that very strength must have been a product of my arrogance.

“We aren’t in Japan anymore,” Tiamat said, with a slightly conservative tone.

“Life isn’t worth as much. Many lives are born and many lives are lost, every day. They’re desperate just to survive. No time to spend mourning the dead.”

And there are places like that on Earth, even today. My homeland just happens to be one of the most peaceful and wealthy places on the planet. Mister Hero, who hailed from that peaceful and wealthy country, must have felt sorry for the lives of the people here. That’s why he taught them some simple

joys of life, like better food and a hot bath.

“Not out of malice, most likely. Out of desire, perhaps.”

The desire for validation, acknowledgment, popularity. While he might have had those desires, I suspected that he felt pity for these people. He must have wanted to do something about this world, where everyone was struggling to survive.

“And that was definitely in good faith. In a court of law, anyway.”

In Japanese law, good faith (or *bona fides* in Latin) can translate to the defendant being unaware of a certain fact, not necessarily as any indication of morality. The hero wasn't aware of the beriberi epidemic caused by the popularization of white rice and lack of balanced diets. He just wanted people to have good food. Therefore, he wouldn't be held responsible in a court of law, and I had no intention whatsoever of prosecuting the man.

“You're harsher than I am, Eiji.” Tiamat chuckled.

Even as we conversed, people were tasting the beet sugar. One clump after another. In fact, the team was starting on a second batch. I had thought we were only in for a tasting today. Why were they cranking up the gears for another batch?

“Before you can worry about that, our first batch is beginning to run out. At this rate, we won't be able to taste any Zunda.”

“You said it. We have to stop them.”

With that, I intended to notify everyone to stop the tasting, when I was frozen in my tracks. Everyone was glaring at me! Boy, was that scary! Even the gentle Mister Milon and the formal Mister Garish were staring at me for trying to bring the tasting to a halt.

Was the sugar that good? It wasn't all that sweet, and had a strange taste to it. It didn't seem like much of a success. To me, it had only seemed less than pointless because we were able to yield more of it than expected. Why was I afraid for my life just for moving to cut off the tasting?

As I shuffled backward out of cowardice, Tiamat stood in front of me as if to

protect me behind her back.

“Calm down, everyone.”

The clamoring room began to quiet down. Wow. I was awed by the power of a dragon’s voice.

There were some twists and turns, but we settled on making a trial batch of Zunda.

Syfer and Gorun pounded the steamed white rice. Since we were without proper equipment, we just threw it in some container and were poking it with some random stick. It seemed like quite the workout. As expected, it didn’t stretch as well as mochi rice.

“It looks delicious in its own right, though.”

This was the kind of mochi used for Ohagi and other treats. Personally, I didn’t dislike it.

“This would be a type of Uru mochi, which uses Uruchi, or gluten-free, rice,” Tiamat explained.

Meanwhile Millia, Maley, and the other ladies were creating the Zunda paste. The recipe was very simple. Grind down peeled edamame, stir in any amount of sugar, and add salt to taste. That was it. However, the beet sugar we created was of a bronze color, which could muddy the edamame’s beautiful green. We had to be careful not to overuse the sugar.

Besides, judging by the reaction from earlier, people here were not used to sweetness. Everything we’ve worked for would be in vain if people started developing different diseases from overconsuming sugar. It was probably best that we kept the sweetness subtle.

It wasn’t until our sixth batch or so when we had our first match of pleasing color and gentle flavor. All of the previous batches were utterly oversweetened. They kept putting in so much sugar that I was about to ask if they were screwing it up on purpose. 50 grams of sugar in 100 grams of edamame? Who in their right mind thought that was appropriate?

While this would vary a bit by preference, we figured out that we only needed about five grams of sugar for every 100 grams of edamame. That's about a packet of sugar, for your reference. The failed batches, by the way, were properly disposed of by the ladies, Baze, and Hieronymus.

And so, our Zunda mochi was complete. I took another bite-size piece. I had done nothing but eat all day, and, at this point, I was getting tired of the sweetness. I could have definitely gone for some meat.

"Hm..."

After trying it, edamame and beet sugar paired better than expected. They were great along with the mochi too. Could this really work?

"What do you think? Mister Milon, Miss Millia?"

I turned to our sponsor and his daughter.

"It's wonderful! Simply wonderful, Sir Eiji!"

His compliments came with tears. This was too much.

"Will it sell?"

That was the million-dollar question. With the people of Lishua not used to any kind of sweetness, I was sure that they would accept the dish's taste. That much I could tell by watching the tasting, but our problem laid with the price. Set it too high and commoners would not be able to afford it, and business wouldn't last if there was no profit made from each sale. This was something we had to think through.

"We would need to charge for labor."

The ingredients were practically free since they were livestock feed and the roots of a weed. However, harvest and treatment cost time and money. This had to be accurately accounted for in its price.

"I would have to do the actual calculations, but I imagine that a price for one would be about one silver coin."

That was pretty steep. About 1000 yen or so. At that price I doubted anyone in modern-day Japan would buy it. Still, with no industrialization and all work done by hand, it was undeniable that labor costs would skyrocket in

comparison.

“Does that include your cut, Mister Milon?”

“With my cut, I would price it at one silver coin and one bronze coin.”

“That’s not enough.”

He had to set up at least a 30% profit margin for himself. If Mister Milon’s business were to go down, we, and eventually the entire city of Lishua, would suffer.

In the end, we set the price temporarily at one silver coin and three bronze coins. There was no point in considering shelf life at this stage. We would only allow people to eat it at the establishment. No take-outs, since there was no form of preservatives. The dish wouldn’t last at all. If we didn’t have them eat it right away, it would spoil before they knew it... especially once it was summer. The beet sugar itself should, once completely dehydrated, last for a while though.

“I understand.”

“I’m glad you understand, Syfer. Now take the sugar out of your pocket.”

“Well... I just wanted my little brothers to have a taste...”

“At least wrap it in something... Why would you shove it straight into your pocket?”

Very telling of the hygienic standards of this world.

7.

Day by day, it became hotter as we approached midsummer. Our Hermit Beans sales were only rising, along with the sales of Zunda mochi. Both were selling out every day, enough that I was beginning to worry if there would be any edamame left to use for livestock feed. But that problem was somewhat mitigated by feeding the livestock leftover beets after taking out their sugar.

A research team and harvest team were sent to the beet field, in order to experiment if the plant could be farmed closer to the city. We were having

more trouble when it came to gagd meat. While demand was high, supply couldn't catch up. Half a month had passed since we introduced the meat to the public, but we had only been able to hunt four gagds.

Apparently this was a decent outcome, but it definitely wasn't enough for the meat to reach each of the tens of thousands of people in Lishua. It wasn't the season for storing food to boot. While its climate was similar to Hokkaido, the northernmost prefecture of Japan, it was still hot in summer.

"Do we have to make refrigerators..."

"Even the most basic of electric refrigerators would be impossible to make with the current technology in Azur."

"Thought so."

We had completely settled into Mister Milon's manor. Since we had gone hands-off with the endeavor itself, we had some time on our hands. True to a Japanese saying 'small minds and free time make for no good,' we had begun talking about inventing a refrigerator.

The predecessor of the refrigerators we have today was a model that chilled its contents with ice. Its structure wasn't complicated: a box with two compartments. The top compartment held the ice, while anything that needed to be chilled was put in the bottom compartment. Since cold air falls, this would chill the contents at the bottom.

However, we were missing a couple of things before we could recreate this contraption in this world: insulation and ice. Without the former, the ice inside it would melt in no time, and how could we obtain the latter at this time of the year? Perhaps we would need to transport it from a high altitude, or have spellcasters create some with their ice magic.

Both options seemed extremely impractical. The ice would melt over such a long journey, and the thought of creating ice by hand (in a sense) was madness. We would run through every qualified spellcaster in the blink of an eye. Whether it was called magic or superpowers, it was unthinkable for a society to rely on the ability of a select few of its inhabitants.

What would happen if, after completing the refrigerator and popularizing it to

the point where it was a necessity and each house, the spellcasters went on strike? People's lives would be drastically altered, since they could no longer store any food.

In order to prevent such an instance, the spellcasters would have to be constantly paid and treated well, not to mention enough of them would need to be employed so they can take vacations. They would be treated differently. In other words, they would be elevated to a privileged class. Without them, life would become unsustainable.

"The birth of arcane rule." Tiamat cackled.

This was more than a certain group of people ruling by force. In this hypothetical world, the spellcasters controlled the very aspect of life.

There was a novel I really enjoyed that had a similar premise, where a high school-aged girl is transported to a world where magic rules all. People who can't use magic are not simply ruled by those who could, but protected, like animals being protected by humans. That was a good one.

"In any case, I want to avoid that kind of future."

"It may not even be worth entertaining the possibility."

"Refrigerator's a no-go, I guess."

"We aren't completely out of options."

"Let's hear what your—"

Interrupting me, the door to our quarters opened and an employee of the shop came flying through it.

"Sir Eiji! There's a messenger from the royal court!"

Here we go, I thought. There was no way that the Kingdom of Azur would idly watch as we furthered our plans.

From just looking at the numbers of Mister Milon's business over the past half month, it was easy to see the exorbitant amount of money that was coming in. There was no reason for the government not to take notice, especially since our intention was to save the people of Azur from an epidemic.

Unfortunately, I was sure they hadn't taken notice too kindly. In modern-day Japan, anyone was free to help people, do good deeds, and volunteer their time. In a medieval society, though, it wasn't that simple. The most popular person in the kingdom had to be the king. A hero other than the king saving the people? Unthinkable!

I may sound like a broken record, but the only reason some high schooler transported from our world can get away with such flashy accomplishments was because they occupy a fictional world. Someone who was summoned for the benefit of this world in its time of need would, of course, be used for the benefit of this world, and discarded after there was no use for them. While that may sound awfully cut and dry, that's reality for you.

"He is a lazy bum who wanted a hero to take care of all of his problems. Naturally, he would take the easiest method when dealing with the aftermath," Tiamat said. I mostly agreed.

"And if the hero wants to avoid such a fate, he's left with two options."

Once peace was restored to the world, the hero could say his farewells and disappear somewhere, or else he could utilize the cheat codes bestowed upon him to usurp the highest power. He had to choose one or the other.

"In Azur, the hero chose the latter."

"Right."

I chuckled, as I cleaned myself up before meeting the royal messenger. According to legends, after vanquishing the Demon Lord, the hero married the king's daughter, and eventually inherited the throne from his father-in-law.

Who knew how much of this was true? Any institution, a country, army, *etc.* would be hard pressed to give up the power they have. This is evident just from looking back on the history of Japan. When Tokugawa Yoshinobu moved to return governmental control to the emperor, it wasn't like everyone obediently followed. Even Oda Nobunaga, who was promised the nation by Saito Dosan, took a decade before he controlled the state of Mino by taking down Tatsuoki, Dosan's grandson.

No country has gone through a change in power without blood. It was only

evident. I imagined that Mister Hero slaughtered every one of his opposition on his way to the throne. That in itself wasn't out of the ordinary. Any kingdom must have started with some form of robbery or usurpation or conquering. Even the very beginning of the British Empire is said to be of some pirate captain or a leader of a gang of outlaws.

We were shown to the meeting room, where the messenger was already waiting for us. He was a middle-aged man, sitting at the seat opposite from the door like he owned the place.

With just one glance, I knew I hated him. While he was the guest, and might have been entitled to that seat, why did he have Mister Milon and Miss Millia sitting on the floor?

However, despite how much I despised and loathed someone, I had a special ability of never showing a lick of it. Most bureaucrats employed the same skill, since anyone coming to complain at a city office had the same kind of attitude this messenger had. I didn't know if they thought they were above everyone else, or if they thought government workers were below everyone else, but I did know that trying to genuinely talk to these types was a waste of time.

I would treat this man by the book. Put myself down, and it would only inflate their ego. Speak logically, and they would start claiming that the government was oppressing them.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Eiji. I was told you're here to see me."

"I am Viscount Zahreed," the messenger introduced himself, full of self-grandeur.

Interesting. A noble sent as a messenger. Apparently they weren't sending any lowly bureaucrat as their first scout. They either didn't have the time for it, or had some other reason to send this man first.

"And how can I help you?"

I sat down on the couch opposite him. While I wasn't offered to sit, Viscount Zahreed didn't reprimand me for it.

"There are rumors that you are using disreputable knowledge to deceive the people of our nation."

That was rather straightforward. Hmm. Perhaps, despite his self-grandeur, he wasn't given too much power to negotiate.

"I see."

"A Hermit's knowledge is disreputable? Has the royalty of this nation no decency?"

While I only acknowledged the question, Tiamat, standing behind me, called out in an offended tone. The messenger's expression froze.

8.

"N-Not that I share those sentiments. I am here only by obligation to my assignment."

The messenger's voice cracked a little. We didn't have to bully the guy too much.

"Now, now, Tia. It's not easy being a bureaucrat."

"Hm. Not much he can do if he's here by orders."

With my consolation, Tiamat backed off. This was a little skit of ours. Good cop, bad cop. The more Viscount Zahreed cowered from Tiamat, the more approachable I would seem in contrast. While either of us could have played either part, I wouldn't have made for a very intimidating bad cop. Of course a dragon's glare packed more of a punch than a measly bureaucrat's.

"Our Great King, His Majesty will question you."

Managing to control his voice, the messenger told us this.

"So, he wants us to come to the castle?"

"Indeed."

Getting angry over the king's lack of etiquette in summoning us when he was the one that wanted something from us would not have advanced our situation. The will of any nation's sole leader supersedes its own laws and common decency. If the king calls it white, so must a crow be white.

"Understood. I have a matter I would like to bring to the king's attention as

well. I'll take it as a lucky coincidence."

"Very well. I have a carriage waiting out front."

He certainly came prepared. With a nod, I rose to my feet, and Tiamat followed. In the corner of my eye I noticed the Viscount's relieved expression. It seemed that the title Hermit did, indeed, carry a special weight.

I felt no special emotion regarding the castle itself. I had no knowledge of their architecture and style, after all. I only acknowledged that it seemed at least bigger and more elaborate than the Melon Castle in Yubari or the NIXE castle (slash aquarium) in Noboribetsu.

We were not shown to the royal hall or anywhere, but to a courtyard. It was several times larger than Mister Milon's, and well maintained. There was even a gazebo, too. It was super extravagant, but a common man's (albeit a successful businessman's) manor and a royal castle wasn't much of a comparison.

"Private meeting, you think?" I asked.

"Most likely. He can't publicly denounce our doings, but praising us could put a ding against the king's power. Seems that he does want to meet us face-to-face in order to discover our intentions."

While we were left waiting, Tiamat and I engaged in a short huddle. That being said there wasn't much to decide at this point. We would meet with the king, have him decide on a price for the beet sugar, and begin controlling its pipeline. In addition, we would have him encourage the public to eat edamame and gagd meat. These would be our two requests. We had already completed more detailed planning, like which negotiation tactics to use, over the past half-month.

"My guess was that we would end up defending ourselves in the royal hall."

Actually, that would have been better. Any decisions made in that situation would have directly been implemented in policy... I assumed. Since I knew little about the governing of medieval nations, I wasn't entirely sure. I only had my own preconception that a public promise would not be broken too easily.

"That would be difficult. We are Hermits. He couldn't very well place those that share the origin of the Hero King on the same level as his other

petitioners.”

“Mister Hero was a Hermit?”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“Only just now.”

“More precisely, he was thought to be a Hermit. He didn’t call himself one. According to his biography, he was depicted as a Hermit and hero who hailed from the realm of dragons.”

Tiamat added that it was most likely a backstory added to boost his authority. Glorified. Idolized. This was the sort of description found in any account of a nation’s founding, including Japan, of course. While some of these myths could be shrugged off by residents of the modern world, we were in a medieval fantasy world.

“That’s why we called ourselves Hermits.”

In order to give authority to our actions that would follow. It was an explanation easier for people to swallow than mere humans trying to save other people.

“Hm. It’s not really a lie, either. It’s true that you’ve both come from the same place.”

The dragon cackled. If the people in this world wanted to think of modern Japan as the realm of dragons, that was their prerogative, she added.

“A con artist would be blown away by that logic.”

I shrugged. Moving things along with the assumption that people will misunderstand, and making no efforts to correct them. That was the definition of intent, if you ask me. Under Tiamat’s clutches, the innocent people of this world were conned easier than those tricked into paying off their unsuspected debt to the IRS in gift cards.

“I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Okay. It wasn’t really, though.”

As we engaged in stupid chatter, a figure appeared from within the inner

quarters. The figure had a large stature for a resident of this world, and while they were faint, he still had some East Asian features. He was a young man with brownish-blond hair and mahogany eyes, with an impressive build. His age seemed close to mine or a little older, but it was difficult to judge his actual age by appearance.

He was the master of the castle, the ruler of Azur, Reinhart V. His full name was Reinhart Mishima, a direct descendant of the hero who overtook this country. The hero's great-great-great-grandchild. He was the fifth because the direct line of royal heirs have all been called Reinhart.

I couldn't help but find his surname, Mishima, a little funny. Of course, no one is responsible for their own name, so I wouldn't show the disrespect of laughing at it.

The king was accompanied by merely three guards. Tiamat and I stood and bowed.

"An honor to be in your presence, Your Majesty."

"I apologize for having you come all this way, Mister Hermit."

While he didn't go as far as to put himself down in the apology, that was a pretty frank response. Or else he might have caught wind that his messenger had upset Tiamat.

"You can't make the trip yourself, Your Majesty. I understand that it was necessary."

"Thanks for saying that, Lord Eiji."

The king gestured to a chair in a gracious manner. He didn't seem like the malicious ruler I was expecting. Then I realized he wasn't malicious at all. In this country, no tax was higher than it needed to be, there was no war... His people lived in peace. He just didn't know that, in the shadows of peace and prosperity, the downfall of his nation was quietly approaching.

"You may know this already, but my ancestor was also a Hermit."

"Hm, I do. Shizuru. I've spoken with him a few times."

Tiamat was the one who answered. I couldn't tell if that was true or not.

Actually, I was pretty sure she was lying. This dragon practically exhaled smoke instead of air. What a character.

“Oh!”

And the king was easily fooled. *You know*, I wanted to say, *you should be just a little more suspicious*. There was no guarantee that anything a Dragon or a Hermit said was fact.

Shizuru Mishima, huh...?

That name rang a bell. It evoked a none too pleasant memory too. I never expected to hear that name after traveling across worlds. Was he really the hero I’ve been hearing about? Was he shepherded to this world after ending his own life?

“Not that I was too close to him.”

“Please. I sense some work of destiny. I don’t even know my own ancestor’s face.”

King Reinhart burst out laughing. Well, duh. It would have been bizarre for him to have held a conversation with his ancestor six generations before him. Since the photograph hadn’t been invented in this world, I assumed he had only seen his face in a painting.

A servant, holding a tray of tea and snacks, approached us courteously. It seemed that the king was ready to spend a portion of his afternoon for us.

9.

Tiamat was picking at the treats, throwing one after another into her gullet.

Hey dummy, have a shred of self-control, will you?

The king’s going to think Hermits starve themselves.

“Hm. Rather tasty. Much more refined than our Zunda mochi.”

No surprise there. They must have honey or something in it instead of beet sugar, and it must have been made by the best of the best. Why make the comparison with our amateur sweet?

“That’s it. I requested your presence because I am intrigued by the things you are selling.”

King Reinhart smoothly segued into the topic on his mind. It was impressive, unless Tiamat teed it up for him on purpose. The intrigue between them seemed so high-level that I couldn’t really interject.

I slurped on my tea, which was really sweet. Perhaps it was a flex, like ‘taste how much honey is in here,’ and ‘that’s how rich I am!’ Everything in moderation, Your Majesty.

“In order to explain our products, we need to begin at the ailment plaguing the city.”

“Ailment?”

“Hm. An ailment caused by eating too much white rice. We Hermits call it ‘beriberi.’”

The king began to ponder, it looked like. I’m sure he had never heard of such a disease. Still, there had been indirect deaths caused by beriberi for years. Those he must have heard about. I wondered how King Reinhart interpreted the disease that previously had unknown causes and no cure.

“The Hermit Beans you are selling is medicine for that ailment?”

“Not medicine. Senzu contain nutrition that prevents beriberi. Same with the gagd meat. We taught how to make Zunda mochi as another method to feed it to the people.”

Tiamat laughed. Her explanation was largely on point. Was there anything I could add?

“Hm. You are saving my people, then?”

“Not as grandiose as that. We’re only cleaning up Shizuru’s mess.”

Don’t say it like it.

“What?”

And now the king was upset. Even the most forgiving person would have been, if their ancestor’s shortcomings were mocked. I felt the need to clear the

air. Almost as if to raise my hand in interjection...

Huh? My arm won't move. Wait, why am I so groggy all of a sudden?

"Wh..."

What's happening, Tia? was what I was trying to ask my partner.

But I couldn't. What came up my throat wasn't my voice but a red glob. It fell out of my mouth.

What is that...? What's happening...?

"Eiji!? You bastard! What did you do!?"

I could hear my partner's enraged voice in the distance. That was the last thing I sensed in that world.

"A little short of a month. That was quite the quick return, Eiji Kazama."

In a space with nothing in it, my consciousness gradually becoming more clear, a woman's voice slid into my ear canals. I knew this place.

"...I see... I died..."

Back where I started. Me, standing still like an idiot, opposite the gorgeous lady.

"Yes. With your life ended, you came back as promised. Surprising that it took you less than a month, but not so that you were poisoned."

Ah, I was poisoned. Probably through the tea that was served. It was probably over sweetened to mask the taste of it or something. That was rather careful of him. With or without sweetener, I wouldn't have been able to taste any poison.

"He seemed friendly to me..."

"He had summoned you with intent to kill you from the beginning. Surely he would put on a friendly act."

There was no room for discourse from the get-go. King Reinhart was asking us questions, but I was sure that was an act, too. He had already done his research on what we'd done and why. His motive? Easy. His country wasn't big enough for two heroes. Anyone who would discredit the accomplishments of Shizuru

the Hero-King was only an obstacle. So, he killed me.

“That’s right. I assume you’re mostly correct. Good observation.”

“A fool thinks in afterthoughts, right? What’s the good in observing things after I’ve been killed?” I shrugged.

“Touché. To add a little more context, the kingdom had been keeping tabs on you the entire time, since you called yourselves Hermits when entering the city.”

“Ooh. It goes back that far, does it?”

The guard we met was loyal to his job. He had reported us to his superiors. As he appeared, he must have been the kind of person to do things by the book.

“So we were being walked on a leash.”

“Correct. Want me to explain why?”

“I have a pretty good guess.”

A traveling duo of Hermits. They were about to come across the population of a country plagued by ailment. Would they let them be, or move to save them? The government pegged us to do the latter. So did the hero-king of old, after all. Overzealous to save anyone who needs saving. Both the hero-king and I were typical Japanese.

And so, I showed them the cure for beriberi. The answer Azur had longed and waited for. While I was at it, I even provided them with a refinement method for sugar, which would bring boundless wealth for the country. Yep. That was enough. No reason to keep me alive. They had the knowledge they needed. All that was left was taking care of me before I became too famous.

“Incredible calculation. How smart of him.”

I crooked my lips.

“There’s no point in throwing your malice at me, Eiji Kazama.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“In any case, let’s talk about what happens next.”

With that, the Inspector began to tell the story. After I (aka Eiji the Hermit)

was killed, the official story became that the cure for beriberi was developed by the hero-king's descendant. Anyone who knew that to be false was someone the kingdom wanted gone. Directly following my death, assassins were sent to Mister Milon's business and the Adventurers' Guild. As a result, both Mister Milon and Mister Garish, along with their wives, perished.

Miss Millia, who barely made it out alive, managed to escape Lishua guarded by Syfer's team, with Baze and Hieronymus in tow. After their daring escape, they met up with Tiamat, who had caused a storm at the castle. They turned to the neighboring Noura. Noura was another country that, thanks to the rice introduced by the hero-king, had experienced a boost in their quality of dining but was suffering from an outbreak of beriberi.

Meanwhile, after monopolizing the knowledge for it, the Kingdom of Azur became the sole provider for edamame and sugar. The medicine for a mysterious disease and a new sweetener. Those were meant to bring wealth in historical proportions to Azur. But they didn't. This was because Syfer, who had usurped the throne of Noura with the aid of a dragon, Fenrir, and Cait Sith two years later, attacked Azur.

That was the beginning of a war that spanned decades. The continent was thrown into chaos, and many lives were lost. There was no time to spend farming anymore. Food supply, along with rice production, drastically decreased, to the point where people couldn't afford to decrease the amount of it by refining the grains. In order to eat as much as possible and consume as much nutrition as possible, people began eating brown rice.

"And so, the threat of beriberi disappeared from the continent, and the entire world."

"Thanks to war?"

"Thanks to war."

"What sort of ending is that!? Even more people died because of war!"

"Most likely. Millions died from the war, either directly or indirectly."

"No..."

"But those deaths weren't caused by a disease that was never supposed to

exist. Millions and billions have died on Earth from warfare.”

The Inspector paused for a moment.

“Congratulations, Eiji Kazama. You saved that world.”

10.

I didn’t know what end result would constitute my actions as a success. That was how I felt when I first embarked on my journey in that world. Now, the Inspector had provided me with the answer. How to eliminate an ailment that never should have existed, and revert the course of history. In the midst of war, the culture provided by Shizuru the Hero-King and the knowledge I had provided would be forgotten and lost. A ridiculous ailment called beriberi, which didn’t exist on Earth during its fifth century or so, would be eliminated.

“...What the fuck?” I squeezed out in a whisper.

Now they were saved? Dying from a disease that shouldn’t exist was taboo, but dying from war was A-okay? Those were people, dammit. How much mockery were we supposed to endure?

“It’s only natural to be offended. Cleaning up someone else’s mess can’t be a fun job.”

“You knew that much, and you still...!”

“I told you in the beginning, Eiji Kazama. I don’t like inter-world travel.”

...That’s right. She had said so. And I didn’t like it either. A world we toyed around with and destroyed. In order to fix it, there had to be even more bloodshed than before?

“...Can you give me one more chance, Inspector?”

“Oh? I believe your job is done here.”

“...”

“Besides, I don’t understand why you are so passionately concerned with that world. What drives you so?”

The beautiful lady wanted an answer. Somehow it felt like she was smiling a

little. That was exactly why I could respond with confidence.

“Inspector. You lied to me, didn’t you?”

“Oh?”

“The role of correcting that world, of cleaning up the hero’s mess wasn’t given to me, but to Tiamat. Am I wrong?”

The Inspector’s lips formed a crescent. She was clearly enjoying this.

“Let’s hear the reasoning for your deduction. This is very intriguing.”

“Her powers are way too strong for her to be the assistant. At no point was I needed.”

“I believe I told you that I specifically chose an average Joe.”

“I doubt that.”

I was an ordinary, average Joe. That much was irrefutable. However, there were literally billions of people like me. I wouldn’t be average if I was a rare specimen. Still, if I was someone completely unrelated to the hero, I wouldn’t have been able to deny random selection for sure, no matter how low the odds were. But I’m not. I have a connection with the hero, albeit not directly.

Shizuru Mishima was the younger brother of my fiancée, Ayano Mishima. He ended his own life six years ago. I had never met him in person. In fact, I had only met my fiancée after his death. She had only told me about her younger brother who was bullied at his high school and ended up killing himself years after his death. I imagined that that was the amount of time required for the leaves of her heart to turn, for her to tell that story to another soul, even though I was already her boyfriend.

“Tiamat wasn’t my assistant, but I was hers.”

Pausing here, I stared down the Inspector straight-on, with an intense gaze.

“And Tiamat is Ayano,” I declared after a deep breath.

“Oh? You’ve figured out that much?”

“Come to think of it, there were a lot of things that didn’t make sense.”

She suggested Ayano as the first potential name for her. That alone could

have been explained by her knowledge packs. Even when we slept in the same room, or right next to each other, Tiamat showed no sign of aversion. Because we were different species? Because we didn't see each other in a romantic light? True, and I thought those were the reasons at the time.

However, she said that she had read my favorite series. Not that she knew of it through a knowledge pack. If Tiamat had always existed in that world, there was no way that she could have ever read a book from Earth. Prime delivery didn't cover inter-world shipping, after all.

The icing on the cake was when she was asked where she was from. "The realm of dragons," she'd answered. In other words, she was from modern-day Japan. A Japanese woman named Ayano who had read my favorite series and felt no aversion toward sleeping next to me.

"There isn't anyone else that meets those criteria, Miss Inspector."

"...Amazing. That was amazing, Eiji Kazama."

After my conclusion, the Inspector let her mouth hang open for a moment before beginning to applaud.

"I knew I couldn't underestimate Earthlings. You recognized your lover, even with a completely different appearance."

"A pathetic lover that didn't notice until he's dead."

Of course, there were many other things that didn't make sense. Like, despite being a dragon, not knowing how much damage her breath would deal. There were hints along the way, but I was only sure of it at the moment of my death. At the very end, it hit me from how she lost her temper. Her lover? Her fiancé? How could I still call myself that?"

"Your deduction is correct, Eiji Kazama. The one summoned to that world as a repairperson was not you, but your fiancée. The god on-site attempted to have the blood relative of the culprit who ruined the world take responsibility for it."

Stopping her applause, the beautiful lady became straight-faced.

"What...!?"

Adding insult to injury to a woman who lost her brother to suicide. It was the

god of that world who summoned a hero in the first place. If anyone should be taking responsibility for that, it was that god. Forcing a relative of the hero to clean up the mess? The audacious thief, indeed. I gritted my teeth, with nowhere to direct my rage.

“I opposed it too. I objected to the very thought of it. But, according to policy, we must accept the requests of the god on-site. So I proposed that someone who could share her load accompany her as an assistant as a stipulation, and pushed it through.”

“And I was chosen for it.”

“Are you unhappy about it?”

“No. Thank you. I can’t thank you enough.”

Her saving grace. That should be me. It had to be me. I would never pass this torch to anyone else.

“I thought you’d say so, Eiji Kazama.”

“With that in mind, I beg of you.”

On my hands and knees in the void, I scraped my forehead on the ground.

“Please give me one more chance. One more chance to help her.”

“Please get up, Eiji Kazama. If you grovel so easily, you’ll devalue yourself.”

The Inspector smiled. Her expression was filled with compassion.

“Incomplete job description. This is clearly a mistake on our part. Therefore, I will accept your request.”

She winked. This woman...! She had knowingly kept this excuse up her sleeve, so she could grant me a re-do if I pointed it out.

“But, Eiji Kazama, this is the only card I have. There won’t be a next time. You die again, and your job really will be done.”

With no cheat codes, and below-average abilities, I had to survive.

Bring it on.

I welcomed it. I wanted to protect her for the rest of my life. That’s why I

proposed.

“Just watch your back, Eiji Kazama.”

“I’ll keep it in mind, Inspector.”

As I replied, my body was enveloped in light. I wasn’t surprised, since I had already experienced it once before. When the light would fade, I would be back in Azur. The beautiful lady faded out of my vision.

“Huh?”

I crooked my neck. The Inspector had disappeared just like last time, but someone else had appeared. This effect was new. The person appeared to be highschool-aged. A boy with kind eyes. I didn’t recognize him, but he looked a little bit like my fiancée.

“...Are you Shizuru?”

No answer. I didn’t even know if he had heard me. Probably for some vague reason like ‘we’re not existing on the same timeline’ or something. My interpretation was too sci-fi-esque to know for sure. I didn’t mind it, though. He was my dear brother-in-law.

“It’s all right, Shizuru. They’re your descendants. I just missed a button last time, that’s all.”

Although he may not have heard me, I tried to tell him in a comforting tone.

“They’ll understand. Trust me. And Ayano.”

The boy began to fade. I thought I saw the faintest smile on his face.

I nodded again. I wasn’t going to have the story my brother-in-law told conclude with a bad ending. I wanted the people he saved to be happy. So... I jumped, one more time.





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Isekai Rebuilding Project: Volume 1

by Yukika Minamino

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